

Transition in Northeastern India

Conflict and Reconciliation

The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam

Uddipana
Goswami

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Conflict and Reconciliation

Transition in Northeastern India

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UDDIPANA GOSWAMI

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For my family
because they did not let me give up

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List of Abbreviations

AASU	All Assam Students' Union
AAKRS	All Assam Koch-Rajbongshi Sanmilani
ABSU	All Bodo Students' Union
ABSU-VF	ABSU Volunteer Force
ABWWF	All Bodo Women's Welfare Forum
ACF	Adivasi Cobra Force
AFSPA	Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958
AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
AHRC	Asian Human Rights Commission
AICC	All India Congress Committee
AIR	All India Radio
AKRSU	All Koch Rajbongshi Students' Union
AnSI	Anthropological Survey of India
APLA	Assam Peoples Liberation Army
AR	Assam Rifles
ASS	Asam Sahitya Sabha
AATWWF	All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation
BAC	Bodoland Autonomous Council
BCF	Birsa Commando Force
BdSF	Bodo Security Force
BJP	Bharatiya Janta Party
BLT	Bodoland Liberation Tigers
BLTF	Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force
BPAC	Bodo Peoples' Action Committee
BPF	Bodo Peoples Front
BPFF	Bodo People's Progressive Front
BSF	Border Security Force
BSS	Bodo Sahitya Sabha
BTAD	Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District
BTC	Bodoland Territorial Council
BTUSS	Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti
BVF	Bodo Volunteer Force
BWJF	Bodo Women's Justice Forum
CEM	Chief Executive Member
CISF	Central Industrial Security Force

CRPF	Central Reserve Police Force
CSSP	Char Saponi Sahitya Parishad
DC	Deputy Commissioner
DIG	Deputy Inspector General
ECOPTA	Expert Committee on Plain Tribes of Assam
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
GR	Gratuitous Relief
IANs	Indo Asian News Service
IB	Intelligence Bureau
IBRF	Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced People
ILP	Inner Line Permit
INC	Indian National Congress
IRB	Indian Reserve Battalion
KLNLf	Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front
KLO	Kamatapur Liberation Organisation
KMSS	Krishak Mukti Sangram Parishad
KNA	Kuki National Army
KPP	Kamatapur People's Party
KRUF	Koch Rajbongsi United Forum
KSDC	Kamatapur State Demand Committee
LSEC	Line System Enquiry Committee
LWSI	Lutheran World Service India
MASS	Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti
MBBS	Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MoS	Memorandum of Settlement
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
MZP	Mizo Zirlai Pawl
NCBC	National Commission for Backward Classes
NCSC	National Commission for Scheduled Castes
NDFB	National Democratic Front of Boroland
NEC	North Eastern Council
NEFA	North East Frontier Agency
NERDA	North Eastern Region Defence Army
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NIA	New Indo-Aryan

NNC	Naga National Council
NREGS	National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme
NSCN-K	National Socialist Council of Nagaland Khaplang
OBC	Other Backward Class
OIL	Oil India Limited
ONGC	Oil and Natural Gas Commission
PCG	Peoples' Consultative Group
PTCA	Plains Tribals Council of Assam
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
RCPI	Revolutionary Communist Party of India
RG	Rehabilitation Grant
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SC	Scheduled Caste
SoO	Suspension of Operations
SRC	State Reorganisation Committee
SSB	Shasatra Seema Bal
SSULA	Seven Sisters United Liberation Army
ST	Scheduled Tribe
SULFA	Surrendered ULFA
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Asom
UN	United Nations
UNLF	United National Liberation Front
UPDS	United Peoples Democratic Solidarity
UTNLF	United Tribal National Liberation Front

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Glossary

The letters ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘R’ and/or ‘O’ in parentheses stand for ‘Axamiya’, ‘Bodo’, ‘Rajbangsi’, and ‘Other’, respectively, to indicate the language they belong to.

<i>ānchalik</i> (B, O)	Literally, regional
<i>āngsā</i> (R)	Dress worn by Koch-Rajbangsi men
<i>anka</i> (A)	Acts in Xankari drama
<i>bahirāgata</i> (A)	Outsider
<i>bāngthāi</i> (O)	Village head
<i>bargit</i> (A)	Xankari hymns
<i>bhājghar</i> (A)	Store
<i>bhāonā</i> (A)	Stylised one-act plays
<i>bidexi</i> (A)	Foreigner
<i>burhā</i> (A)	Old, or senior
<i>burhi</i> (A)	Old woman
<i>burkandaz</i> (O)	Originally, guards or soldiers. They came to Assam as mercenaries.
<i>chat-pat</i> (O)	Quick
<i>chur</i> (A)	Or <i>sar</i> , riverine islands and floodplains
<i>dakhanā</i> (B)	Dress worn by Bodo women
<i>dauljātrā</i> (A)	A festival
<i>dekā</i> (A)	Young, or junior
<i>gāon burā</i> (A)	Village head
<i>ghoxā</i> (A)	Xankari verses
<i>goxāi</i> (A)	Head of a <i>xattra</i>
<i>hāti</i> (A)	A particular design of housing
<i>hindutva</i> (O)	Literally, ‘Hinduness’; the politics of Hindu nationalism
<i>khol, mridanga, tāl</i> (A)	Musical instruments
<i>kshatriya</i> (A, O)	The warrior caste among the Hindus
<i>mekhalā-sādor</i> (A)	Dress worn by Axamiyā women
<i>mel</i> (A)	Meeting
<i>melki</i> (A)	Those participating in a <i>mel</i>
<i>nāk sepetā</i> (A)	Flat-nosed

<i>nām-kirtan</i> (A)	Xankari form of prayer
<i>nāmghar</i> (A)	Prayer hall
<i>numaliā ji</i> (A)	Youngest daughter
<i>pargānā</i> (A, O)	A traditional grouping of villages for revenue purposes in those parts of Assam that were once under Mughal rule
<i>pātāni</i> (R)	Dress worn by Koch-Rajbangsi women
<i>raiz mel</i> (A)	People's meet
<i>raikats</i> (O)	A princely family, descendants of the Koch dynasty, who controlled large estates in Koch Bihar. They came to be known as <i>zamindars</i> under the Mughals and the British.
<i>rishi</i> (A, O)	Hindu holy man
<i>ryot</i> (A, O)	Farmer/cultivator
<i>samāj</i> (B, O)	Literally, society/council
<i>sannyāsi/fakir</i> (A, O)	Hindu and Muslim ascetics who led the Monk's Rebellion in 18th century Bengal. Some term the rebellion an early war of independence but others categorise the rebels as bandits. They came to Assam as mercenaries.
<i>Sarjyāpad</i> (A)	Buddhist mystic songs of ancient Assam
<i>siddhāchārya</i> (A, O)	Buddhist holy man
<i>xankari</i> (A)	Of or relating to Xankardeb; the religion propounded by Xankardeb
<i>xaran</i> (A)	Refuge
<i>xattra</i> (A)	A Vaishnavite monastery
<i>xisya</i> (A)	Disciple, neophyte

Preface

I have been conducting field work among the various communities in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) area of Assam since 2004. The logical culmination – at least to my mind – of my long research in one of the most violent conflict zones of Assam was to explore means of ethnic reconciliation. As I saw it, such reconciliation was the only means of countering the bad blood that has been flowing (literally and metaphorically) between the various communities living there. I, therefore, enrolled at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, in 2007 to pursue my PhD research on the ethnic and nationalistic politics in the region, to delve into the conflicts raging there, and to look for means of transforming these conflicts and restoring broken relations. This book originated in the said research.

As I delved deeper, I became convinced that the troubles in Bodoland are only a microcosmic manifestation of the turbulence that has infested the entire northeastern region of India in ‘post’-colonial times. I have made every effort to link my study and understanding of Bodoland with the larger picture in our ‘troubled periphery’. I sincerely wish that my own effort – as reflected in this book – towards acquiring a better understanding of the conflict dynamics in Bodoland in particular and in the Northeast in general, will facilitate an informed approach among those involved in addressing, studying and participating in the mechanisms of peace-building and conflict transformation here.

Unfortunately, conflicts still rage in the region and ethnic violence continues to ravage the lives of the people here. As somebody who believes that academic research cannot exist in isolation and must touch the lives of the people (the ‘subjects’ of our study) somewhere, I can only hope that this book will shed some light, however dim, on what needs to be done towards bringing lasting peace to the people among whom I have always felt so much at home.

Guwahati
June 2013

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Author's Note

WHY AXAMIYĀ

As a translator who has thought long and hard about resistant translation and its relation to identity politics in Assam, I have always preferred to use the term Axamiyā in my writings whenever I refer to the language, culture or people of Assam. But the more I studied the identity and ethnic politics of my homeland, the more confused I became. Would it be right to use 'Axamiyā' to denote all the ethnic and autochthonous groups of Assam? After all, many of them do not consider themselves Axamiyā any more. And besides the Axamiyā language itself, the *x* sound does not occur in the languages of the other autochthonous or settler populations in Assam. Yet, these populations do all belong to Assam, and have all belonged to the land for centuries now. Gradually, therefore, I began to differentiate between 'Axamiyā' and 'Assamese' – I would use Axamiyā to mean only the community of people who spoke the language as their mother tongue, and Assamese to denote the people 'of or belonging to the geo-political entity called Assam'. Assamese would thus include the Axamiyā, but not be equivalent to it.

But the more I studied the growth and development of the Axamiyā identity, the less convinced I became that those who returned Axamiyā as their mother tongue in successive censuses had the exclusive right to apply the label to themselves. I realised that Axamiyā – not unlike any other identity of course – was an identity in flux. It was being constantly refashioned by those who, at various points in history, have called themselves by that name. An amorphous entity, it has taken whatever shape its keepers or contestants have imposed upon it from time to time, depending on the prevalent political exigencies. In pre-colonial Assam, the Ahoms became Axamiyā when they wanted to politically subjugate the other populations of Assam; in recent decades, the Bodos stopped being Axamiyā when they wanted to chart a political destiny independent of the other communities. Only one community of people – that had slowly begun migrating to Assam much after any of the other autochthonous peoples of the

land did – kept their hold on to the identity quietly and tenaciously till it came to be (quite erroneously) equated with them.

These were the Aryan Hindus from ‘mainland’ India who amalgamated to some extent with the local populations but throughout their history in Assam, retained a position of pre-eminence among all the other communities. At the dawn of modernity in Assam, when the idea of the Axamiyā nation was being re-shaped in response to colonial rule, a sizeable middle class had developed within this community. They assumed ownership of the Axamiyā label, dictating terms of inclusion and exclusion. When Assam became a part of the Indian Union after 1947, they became the ‘political sub-contractors’ of the powers that be in Delhi. Subsequently, they started insinuating – through policies and attitudes – that only they had any right to the political benefits accruing to the Axamiyā. This alienated the other communities of Assam and they gradually conceded to the Axamiyā Hindus the exclusive claim to the identity. They found that it was easier to demand political gains if they distanced themselves and charted independent identities. Most of the ethnic conflicts raging in Assam today are a fall-out of this alienation on the one hand, and appropriation on the other.

None of these communities, however, have any exclusive claim to being called Axamiyā – the ownership of the identity lies equally with all of them. ‘Axamiyā’, after all, is not an *a priori* entity, but one that developed over the centuries through interaction among different ethnic groups and communities of people. The Ahoms, Bodos, Axamiyā Hindus and all other communities contributed to its organic and syncretic evolution. But the conflict inducing political rhetoric of the times shows a blatant lack of appreciation for this interethnic nature of the Axamiyā identity. The prevalent political idiom is born on the one hand, of one constituent community’s desire to appropriate what belongs to all peoples of Assam. On the other, it has been shaped by the rejection of the Axamiyā heritage by other constituent communities at the prospect of parallel political gains. Between these opposing tendencies, the true import of being Axamiyā has been lost. This book is the outcome of my constant search for this lost meaning.

I myself belong to the dominant Axamiyā Hindu community and in the absence of an alternative, I have also in my narration, used the term ‘Axamiyā’ to stand for my own community alone. But as

I conclude in this book, I do hope all other communities reclaim their right over it. Only then can true ethnic reconciliation take place in Assam.

A NOTE ON THE ORTHOGRAPHY

During one of our many informal conversations, noted scholar and journalist, M. S. Prabhakara, once said that the Axamiyā script has quite a few vestigial alphabets we can do without. One each of *s*, *t*, *th*, *d*, *dh*, *n* and *x*, instead of two or three of each, would serve our phonemic purposes very well, since our tongues cannot – or do not – distinguish between the sounds of the many variants. It is only the written form of the language that distinguishes between the *hrasha* and *dirgha* (short and long) *a*, *i* and *u* sounds, as well as *dantiya* and *murdhanya* (dental and cerebral) *ṭs*, *th's*, *ḍs*, *dh's*, *n's* and *x's*. If it was left to the American Missionaries, he felt, they might have done away with these distinctions in the script.

That did not happen however, and therefore, as somebody who translates from Axamiyā to English regularly, I have often been faced with many dilemmas while transliterating Axamiyā words in English. The same predicament appeared before me when writing this book as there are many culture specific terms and Axamiyā proper names and names of books, poems, places, etc. that I have had to transliterate here – they could not all be translated effectively, nor often did I feel the need to pamper (or alternately peeve) the non-Axamiyā reader with lengthy explanations woven into the narrative. For the most part, I have used the conventional spellings for proper names. Thus, Jyotiprasad Agarwala remains Jyotiprasad Agarwala. But his poem, which would conventionally be written as 'Asamiya Dekar Ukti' becomes 'Axamiyā Dekār Ukti'.

I wondered if I should transliterate the title as 'Axameeyā Dekār Ukti' to show that the first *i* sound is represented by the *dirgha* (longer) *i* sign and the second by the *hrasha* (shorter). Should I write *Ukti* for the *hrasha u* here? Would *Ookti* make it sound like *dirgha u*? How do I differentiate between the *murdhanya* and the *dantiya t* and transliterate the *dantiya t* here any differently from a *murdhanya t* that might occur elsewhere?

Over and above these, there are some uniquely Axamiyā sounds that pose the greatest challenges during transliteration: how does

one represent the velar fricative? And what happens when the same alphabet that represents the velar fricative is used to represent the alveolar fricative as well, as it sometimes happens? In short, how do I give the non-Axamiyā reader a sense of the sound of the Axamiyā language?

Sticking to International Phonetics could be one solution out of this dilemma but it could make the reading process tedious if one had to turn to a phonetic dictionary each time a transliteration occurred in the text. I could perhaps stick to precedents and transliterate etymologically. This is how Axamiyā names, for instance, have traditionally been transliterated (and I retain the names as such) – until quite a few years back when most notably, one major English daily of Assam, *The Sentinel*, incorporated into its style sheet the practice of representing the velar fricative *s* with the phoneme *x*. This was seen as a bold break from tradition, although in reality it was but a selective amalgamation of two traditions – the prevalent ‘etymological’ practice and the phonetic, or more appropriately, the phonemic. In recent years, this practice has gained much currency. I have also, as such, stuck to the use of *x* for the velar fricative in my language.

Further, I do not differentiate between the long and short *i*’s and *u*’s. To differentiate the short *a* sound from the long, however, I use a diacritical mark over the latter since this phonetic symbol seems to be more widely known and readily understandable than any other.

I had to curb the urge to use *o* in place of *a* in most places since the transliterated Axamiyā *a* sounds nothing like the English *a* standing alone: ‘Ordinarily it is a short vowel of the nature of the sound in English *hot...*’ (ibid: 65). But at the same time, I needed to differentiate between the *o* sound in English as produced by the distinctive vowel sign assigned to it and the ‘o’-ness (if I may) of the Axamiyā *a*. The latter is of a less rounded nature, more in the manner of an *aw*-sound (as in the English word ‘awe’). In the end, I retained it as *a* with the hope that readers (especially the non-Axamiyā ones) will use this note as a guide and read the *a* in Axamiyā with a touch of ‘awe’. It was the only vowel sound, after all, that the patriarch of most things Axamiyā, the legendary Xankardeb, used in composing his beautiful paean to Lord Vishnu, ‘*Karatala kamala, kamaladala nayana*’. This poem is believed to have been composed by Xankardeb as a young student, after learning merely the consonants of the Axamiyā alphabet. Despite the fact that I have viewed certain aspects of Xankardeb’s legacy quite critically in my work, I am also aware that there would

be no Axamiyā ethos as we know it without him. He is, after all, the patriarch of most things Axamiyā, and as such, I have not spelt his name as 'Sankardeva' as the prevalent practise is. I have rather, taken the liberty to transliterate it in an unconventional phonemic way, to reflect better his unique Axamiyā-ness.

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This note of thanks will remain incomplete, however, if I did not thank the people at Routledge who have been working tirelessly with me to get this book out there.

Introduction

Assam, Conflicts



The manner in which the Indian State was put together following the transfer of power from the British rulers in 1947 – often through the political arm twisting of historically independent nations and diplomatic manipulations of sovereign princely states – left much room for resentment among the newly subjected peoples thus aligned. In the northeastern frontier of the country, over and above applying such manoeuvres to amalgamate, the nascent Indian State also left crucial issues, such as (among others) power sharing and governance, the demarcation of the territories of the federating units (states) and balanced economic development, unaddressed for a long time. And it did this to the extent that the constituents of this suddenly-peripheralised region felt totally alienated and exploited. With a few notable exceptions, though, most of the communities of the region did initially accept the new India that projected an image of ‘unity in diversity’. However, a consistent and spectacular mismanagement of their ethnic aspirations led many of them to soon rise in revolt. Some subsequently even tried to contest the very grounds of their inclusion within the Indian Union. Conflicts between and within communities and against the State have thus become a norm in ‘post’-colonial Northeast.

Assam particularly, which is one of the seven states¹ of Northeast India and lies at the heart of the region, has seen numerous conflicts of varying intensity. Its history is littered with interesting case studies of all the different kinds of conflicts that have been plaguing the region. These have ranged from mass civil-disobedience movements engendered by long-standing grievances against the Indian State to armed militancy favouring secession from the State to ethnic and communal riots, as well as genocides aimed at ethnic cleansing.

Of the various causes of conflict in Assam, and the Northeast as a whole, ethnicity has been the most potent. It is true, of course, that ethnicity itself is never the root cause of conflict, nor is there

any necessary connection between it and conflict (cf. Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 3). Historically and universally, though, ethnic or nationalistic politics has, more often than not, introduced structural violence and shaken up the ‘deep structures’ – that is, the ‘patterns of relations between the segments of society’ (Graf, Kramer and Nicolescu 2007: 132) – and this has led to ethnic conflicts. This book is an extensive exploration of the correlation between deep culture,² structure and the ethno-nationalist conflicts that have been raging in Assam for decades now.

Most of these conflicts have been about attesting and/or contesting ethnic boundaries, be they spatial (territorial), temporal (drawing from a particular point in history), or ideological (drawing from a belief in a common ancestry, identity, memory, and value system). Very few communities in the region, though, can convincingly claim an ethnic identity on the basis of the definition(s) accepted in scholarship relating to ethnicity.³ Of these, perhaps, the Bodos of Assam constitute a convincing textbook illustration. This book takes them as a case study and considers ethnic and nationalistic politics as manifested among them. Juxtaposed with this is the development and evolution of ethnic and nationalist sentiments among two other communities of Assam, the Axamiyā and the Koch-Rajbangsi. These two communities cannot be so easily labelled, nor can the boundaries between them – ethnic or otherwise – be very convincingly demarcated. Ethnographic sketches and the interethnic histories of these communities are detailed in Chapters 1 and 2.

Subsequent chapters illustrate how the amorphous nature of ethnic boundaries as well as the resurgent political will to crystallise them have led to various kinds of conflict at different points in the history of these three communities under consideration. The role of colonial and ‘post’-colonial policies in the growth of ethnic and nationalist politics in Assam is discussed in Chapters 2–5. These chapters also co-relate the rise of ethnic politics with the processes of State formation and functioning in the region. As the Indian State evolved, its administrative approach towards the Northeast introduced structural violence⁴ in the society by allowing for asymmetrical patterns of power relations between ethnic groups and encouraging violations of basic needs at different levels. Traditional faults and fissures – or cultural violence⁵ – between the communities were taken advantage of in the course of doing this. Thus, it was only a matter of time before latent conflicts became manifest.

To understand the causes of the violent manifest conflicts in Assam, then, it is essential to explore the intricacies of the ethnic relations – historical and contemporary, conflictive and cooperative – between the various communities in conflict. Such a scrutiny leads up to my final argument in this book that the cure for these conflicts is also inherent in a better understanding of the aforementioned intricate relationships.

Chapters 3–5 specifically trace the development of the conflicts in Assam. The next two chapters outline how the Indian State, unfortunately, has been unwilling to look for long-term curative measures, one of which could have been the exploitation of the historical commonalities between the communities in conflict. On the contrary, traditional rivalries and existent animosities have been used most effectively by the Indian State towards implementing one of its most potent instruments of controlling conflicts in the region: namely, co-option of the influential sections within the parties in conflict. This has also been one of the most successful counter-insurgency measures used by the State. Chapters 6 and 7 dwell on this and other ways in which the conflicts in Assam and the Northeast are being addressed and engaged with. For instance, another major response of the Indian State to these conflicts – large-scale militarisation – has been at quite a superficial level. It is superficial because it limits itself to understanding and tackling direct violence alone. Structural and cultural violence, which are the underlying causes, and potent enough to re-ignite conflicts even after the cessation of direct violence, are left unaddressed.

As a result, sustainable peace has remained unattained/unattainable. No settlement, resolution or transformation of the conflict situation(s) is in sight. On the contrary, old conflicts are festering and indeed, in turn, fostering newer ones. And these new conflicts have not just been directed against the State and its various agencies and actors, but have also led to violence between the numerous communities that constitute the multi-cultural, poly-ethnic mosaic of the region.

But this has always been one of the major perils of an approach that primarily emphasises conflict settlement, which considers conflict as merely ‘a problem of political order and of the status quo’ and in which ‘violent protracted conflict is ... deemed the result of incompatible interests and/or competition for scarce power resources, especially territory’ (Reimann 2004). There have, of course, been some half-baked efforts at conflict resolution or ‘process oriented

activities that aim to address the underlying causes of direct, cultural and structural violence' (ibid.).⁶ What has been manifestly absent, though, is the conflict-transformation and long-term peacebuilding approach, which aims to overcome 'revealed forms of direct, cultural and structural violence' (ibid.). Chapters 8–9 emphasise the need to adopt such an approach and put forward some workable suggestions for conflict transformation⁷ in Assam.

Conflict transformation aims not merely at eliminating 'the conditions that create an environment of conflict' but also at bringing about 'the structural changes required to remove it'. Most importantly, it advocates 'the promotion of conditions that create cooperative relationships'⁸ (Burton and Dukes 1990: 2). Its ultimate aim is restoration of relationships and to this end, reconciliation becomes necessary in order to restore the 'social harmony of the community in general and of social relationships between conflict parties in particular' (Boege 2006). As Chapters 8 and 9 argue, ethnic reconciliation⁹ could also very well be the key to establishing long-term peace in Assam and the Northeast. Chapter 9 particularly argues that conflict transformation and ethnic reconciliation can draw inspiration from history and tradition where the potential for peacebuilding already existed.

CONFLICTS IN ASSAM: A BRIEF HISTORY

Assam's 'post'-colonial history has been one beset by many conflicts – linguistic, political and economic – between the autochthons¹⁰ and settler communities that (for the most part) came in after the British colonisers did. It is interesting to trace how these settler-indigenous conflicts that had once united the ethnic and autochthonous groups under a nativist banner could not, however, keep these communities united for too long. They soon turned on each other and conflicts between them (some of a manifestly violent nature) broke out.

When the British were withdrawing and Assam joined the Indian Union, those at the helm of running the State in its nascent stage did not foresee conflicts arising along ethnic and/or indigenous lines. The Axamiyā people had begun to assert their nationalistic aspirations in the 19th and 20th centuries, when Assam was being shaped as an integral part of the Indian nation. But once the Indian State was formed, it was not long before grievances surfaced among the Axamiyā leadership against the perceived 'step-motherly' treatment

of Mother India. From stipulating that Assam share India's refugee burden, to denying it economic development while exploiting its rich oil and coal reserves, besides tea, the State was seen as indulging in 'colonial exploitation' of the region. The grievances peaked in the 1970s after the formation of Bangladesh as a nation and the inability/reluctance of the Indian State to stop the flow of refugees into Assam. The continued illegal influx of populations from the neighbouring country raised fears of demographic swamping and loss of identity among the Axamiyā people whose resentment found expression in a mass civil-disobedience movement that started in 1979. The movement which came to be known as the Assam Movement lasted till 1985 and ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in that year. Simultaneous with the mass movement, the period also saw the birth of various armed militant groups with a secessionist agenda,¹¹ of which only the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) survived, and is today one of the strongest insurgent groups of Assam and the Northeast as a whole.¹²

While the ULFA (or at least a faction of it)¹³ continues its armed movement based on the idea of an independent federal Assam where all ethnic communities (and even the settler communities) can coexist, the Assam Movement had exactly the opposite impact on the inter-ethnic fabric of the state. It marked a period when every small and big ethnic group began distancing itself from the Axamiyā identity and subsequently started placing demands for separate ethnic homelands. Since the formation of the Axamiyā nation, the Axamiyā-speaking Hindu middle class had been at the forefront of the nation-building process, and it had traditionally assumed an attitude of cultural superiority and social dominance over the other ethnic groups. This started the process of a gradual erosion of the interethnic identity that had been building up in Assam over the past so many centuries. When the Indian Union was formed, and the Axamiyā middle class became its 'political sub-contractor' in the Northeast (Bhaumik 2007: 18), this process gained momentum. By 1985, the breaking point had been reached and the smaller ethnic groups began asserting their own distinctive identities and nationalist demands.

Conflicts between Communities

Primarily at the receiving end of the political outrage that led to the launching of the Assam Movement, were migrant populations from Bangladesh (formed in 1971 from what was earlier East Pakistan,

and before that, East Bengal). These migrants continued coming into Assam in hordes, often illegally, even after the creation of international boundaries following the Partition of India in 1947. Fears of demographic swamping, political disenfranchisement given the rising numbers of illegal migrants, and loss of livelihood, identity and religion were some of the reasons that led to the outbreak of the movement.

In spirit, the Assam Movement had set out to demand that the Indian State take concrete measures to stop the illegal influx of these immigrants, who were the *bidexi*, or foreigners. Gradually, however, it became more and more xenophobic in nature and demanded the ouster of all *Āli Kuli Bangāli*, *Nāk Sepetā Nepāli*, where *Āli* stood for the East Bengali (later Bangladeshi) Muslim peasant, *Kuli* for the tea-garden labourers brought into Assam in large numbers by the British from parts of mainland India, *Bangāli* for the Hindu Bengalis, and *Nāk Sepetā Nepāli* for the ‘flat-nosed’ Nepalis whose immigration into Assam had also begun during the colonial period. Despite the fact that early migrants from most of these communities had already embraced the Axamiyā language and identity, and been in turn allowed membership into the Axamiyā fold, the chauvinism generated by the Assam Movement obliterated all distinction between legal and illegal migrants. Parochial Axamiyā elements took control of its agenda and all *bahirāgata*, or outsiders – that is, non-autochthonous peoples – were seen as threatening the land, livelihood, language, and identity of the Axamiyā community in varying measures, and depriving the ‘sons of the soil’ of their due.

As the movement progressed, its agenda came to be hijacked by the ethnic elite among the Axamiyā Hindu middle class, which actively propagated the idea that ‘sons of the soil’ referred only to the Axamiyā-speaking Hindu community. At places, attacks took place even against other autochthonous indigenous and ethnic communities. The movement, purportedly one of civil disobedience, thus turned violent in pockets. Pogroms were staged against migrant communities – in 1983, thousands of East Bengali Muslims were killed in Nellie, a few kilometres from the city of Guwahati. Violence at other places, such as Phulung Sapor and Gohpur, targeted the Bodos. And in the final analysis, a movement that had begun on the basis of real felt grievances and had had a mass base among all indigenous and non-indigenous autochthonous communities of Assam became a turning

point in defining the relations of the dominant Axamiyā Hindus with all the other communities of Assam, indigenous and settler.

The Assam Accord was signed in 1985 as an agreement between the Indian State and the Axamiyā leadership to put an end to the Assam Movement, but certain clauses in the agreement lent themselves to interpretations inimical to the indigenous autochthons. Already, there had been a growing sense of alienation among the smaller ethnic communities. Government policies – of which perhaps the most hated was the Official Languages Act of 1960, which sought to impose the Axamiyā language upon all communities of Assam¹⁴ – coupled with expressions of cultural and social superiority by the Axamiyā Hindus managed to create widespread anti-Axamiyā feelings. The process of alienation and the proliferation of new identity movements gained momentum, and post-1985, rumblings of ethnic separatism were being heard. Two years later, in 1987, the Bodo Movement (1987–2003) for a separate state was launched.

The Bodo Movement marked a near-complete severance of the Axamiyā identity from its indigenous roots and invalidated its true historical nature and cultural heritage. The Bodo leaders unfortunately conceded the claims of the Axamiyā Hindus to the exclusive use of the Axamiyā (Assamese) label, and the trend has continued. Ruing the lower status of the community in the ethnic hierarchy of Assam, they lamented:

The immigration, spread and growth of the Assamese started only since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries during the period of Ahoms only. They migrated from Konouj ... But, surprisingly and cleverly, this artificial Assamese community has captured Assam and its administration and now dominating the once master-ruler of Assam – the Kacharis – the Bodos. The outsider Assamese has unjustifiably overthrown the original master Kacharis! (ABSU 1987a)¹⁵

The insider–outsider rhetoric thus took a completely different turn, and although sentiments against immigrant communities continued escalating, conflicts within the autochthonous communities also grew simultaneously and exponentially.

The Bodo Movement took place in two phases: the first phase lasted between 1987 and 1993, when a settlement was proposed by the Assam government in the form of the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC) Act;¹⁶ and the second phase started with the failure

of the initial settlement in 1993, lasting till 2003. The first phase of the Bodo Movement was launched by leaders such as Upendranath Brahma and Prem Singh Brahma, who had participated in the Assam Movement but felt betrayed by its settlement. Prem Singh Brahma, for instance, had been an active member of the Gana Sangram Parishad, an umbrella association of various organisations leading the Assam Movement. However, after the signing of the Assam Accord, he was sidelined from the political scene, and what is more, persecuted under various charges.

Reeling from a similar sense of betrayal, the charismatic Upendranath Brahma, widely considered the *Bodofā* or ‘father of the Bodos’, launched the Bodo Movement for a separate state in 1987 under the All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) banner. The ABSU was at the helm of the leadership, just as the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) had taken the lead in the Assam Movement. In fact, the Bodo Movement had a lot of similarities with the Assam Movement, trained as its leaders were in the intricacies of leading a civil-disobedience movement from their experience during the latter movement. The Assam Movement had brought home the lesson that the State does not listen to peaceful petition-making; noisy agitation was the only course of action if redress of grievances was to be sought. What is more, the Bodos learnt from the mistakes of the Assam Movement and thus proved more effective in their methods of anti-State agitation.

Under Upendranath Brahma’s leadership, the ABSU demanded that the territory of Assam be divided in half, with the north bank of the Brahmaputra being given to the Bodos as their exclusive homeland. Their rallying cry at this stage of the movement was ‘Divide Assam Fifty-Fifty’. They strongly denounced the dominance of the Axamiyās: ‘The Bodos ... can also ask – why not the Assamese people read, speak and accept Bodo as a whole for a link language and for the integrity of Assam? Will the Assamese agree?’ (ABSU 1987b). The cultural chauvinism of the Axamiyās was also attacked:

The Assamese people have never accepted the tribals as the part and parcel of Assamese community and society in real sense [*sic*], though they give a motivated slogan of Greater Assamese Nationality. As for instance, a Goswami Brahmin family will never allow or agree to give its daughter for a social marriage with a tribal youth. (Ibid.)

Despite its stated non-violent nature, the movement turned violent at places and a large number of Axamiyā government employees were

brutally killed or forced to leave the areas of Bodo dominance. An armed wing of the ABSU, the ABSU-Volunteer Force (ABSU-VF), also known as the Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF), was formed by Prem Singh Brahma. It took up activities ranging from bomb blasts to attacks on passenger trains, the killing of security personnel and civilians, as well as extortion and arson. The ruling Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) government of the time, which had been formed by the victorious leadership of the Assam Movement, reacted with brutality to suppress the Bodo Movement. By 1990, however, the AGP government was ousted and the Congress government, which had in its turn brutally suppressed the Assam Movement, was returned to power. It took advantage of the sudden leadership vacuum among the Bodos created in the early 1990s following the death of Upendranath Brahma and hastily drew up the BAC Accord in 1993.

But given the lacunae in the accord, within a year of signing it, Sansuma Khungur Bwismutiary resigned as the chief executive of the BAC, and Prem Singh Brahma took over. By 1996, a disillusioned Brahma formed a militant organisation, the Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT) or the Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF), with the aim of creating a separate state of Bodoland yet again. The second phase of the Bodo Movement had begun, and it was a period of militant nativism. Ethnic cleansing of settler communities started in 1993, and then again in 1996 and 1998. The aim was to create a Bodo majority in the areas to be included within Bodoland. The National Democratic Front of Boroland¹⁷ (NDFB) had in the meanwhile been formed in 1986 and its stated aim was the formation of a 'sovereign' Bodoland which, unlike the Bodoland demanded by the ABSU and later the BLT, would be outside the ambit of the Indian constitution. The NDFB also indulged in a lot of ethnic cleansing although it did not extend its support to the BLT-led movement. Unlike the NDFB, however, for the ABSU and the BLT, separatism was never an option and even their vocabulary always remained within the confines of constitutionally sanctioned demands.

Finally, to settle the BLT-led armed conflict, the State drew up the second Bodo Accord, known as the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) on Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) 2003, which gave enormous legislative, financial and executive powers to the Bodo leadership. A modification of the Sixth Schedule 'to amend the Constitution of India in its application to the State of Assam',¹⁸ allowed for minimum interference by the state government in the functioning

of the autonomous council, and gave it a constitutional status. Flushed with funds that the state government had no control over except in their disbursal, the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) was envisaged as having powers equivalent to a state, with only the actual status of being one denied to it. As part of the agreement reached between the government and the BLT leadership, general amnesty was announced for all its cadres, and 2,641 BLT cadres, led by BLT Chairman Hagrama Mohilary, surrendered in Kokrajhar. Mohilary went on to become the chief executive of the interim council, sworn in on 6 December the same year. In the elections to the BTC held in 2005, he was returned uncontested to the office. Currently, Mohilary's party, the Bodo Peoples Front (BPF), has entered into a seat-sharing agreement with the ruling Assam government. On the face of it, therefore, the Bodo–Axamiyā conflict has been resolved at a certain level.

The creation of the BTAD has, however, brought the Bodo and the Axamiyā communities into conflict with the Koch-Rajbangsi. The Bodos, particularly, have vehemently opposed the Koch-Rajbangsi community's main demands – for being enlisted as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in the Indian constitution and for the creation of a separate homeland of Kamatapur. The Koch-Rajbangsi community has yet to launch a sustained movement like the Assam or the Bodo Movements, and its political demands are yet to attain the intensity of overt violence and widespread political mobilisation. However, over and above a few political parties, the community also has a strong students' union – the All Koch Rajbongshi Students' Union (AKRSU) – and students' unions have traditionally been the main mobilising force behind most political action in Assam and the Northeast as a whole.

Since the 1990s, which saw the birth of most of the major organisations that are currently fighting a political battle for the rights of the community in north Bengal (the part of the state of West Bengal adjacent to western Assam), the Koch-Rajbangsi organisations in Assam also have become politically more vocal and active. The AKRSU was formed in Assam in 1993. After the formation of the Kamatapur People's Party (KPP) in 1996 and of the Greater Cooch Behar People's Association in 1998 in north Bengal, it joined forces with these organisations to intensify its political mobilisation. In 2008, a faction of the AKRSU contributed to the formation of a joint forum of the Koch-Rajbangsi populations of Assam and North Bengal – the

Greater Kamata United Forum. The aim of this forum was to overcome the difficulties inherent in fighting a united battle through a community divided by administrative boundaries, political affiliations and constitutional statuses. In any case, even if they are not directly part of the joint forum, most other Koch-Rajbangsi organisations of Assam have also been extending their support to the organisations of north Bengal (A. J. Das 2008).

Earlier in 2005, the All Assam Koch-Rajbongshi Sanmilani (AAKRS) had issued a call for a 120-hour economic blockade in Assam. The aim of the blockade was to disrupt the movement of commercial vehicles to and from the Northeast through Srirampur and Baxirhat, the gateways to the entire region in western Assam. AAKRS General Secretary Durlav Chamua claimed that the blockade would paralyse the operations of oil refineries and the movement of goods trains. He threatened:

We have been leading a democratic movement for the community since 1967, demanding ST status. Successive governments at the Centre have not given due importance to our demand. The patience of the community is running thin and a radical section is raring to join the militant movement for a separate Kamatapur state which is gaining ground in parts of North Bengal and western Assam. (*The Statesman* 2005)

The Kamatapur State Demand Committee (KSDC) was subsequently formed as an umbrella organisation of several Koch-Rajbangsi organisations, including the AKRSU, AAKRS, Chilarai Sena, All Koch Rajbangshi Mahila Samiti, Koch Rajbongshi Sahitya Sabha, All Kamatapur Students' Organisation, Greater Cooch Behar Democratic Party, Greater CoochBehar People's Association, and KPP. In 2009, the KSDC held a mass rally in Kokrajhar, the heart of the BTAD, and placed the same demands. The AKRSU president, Biswajit Roy, threatened to launch a 'rigorous movement' if the demands were not met (*Assam Tribune* 2009).

The Koch-Rajbangsi people in the BTAD are getting increasingly restive. On 21 October 2010, 12 Koch-Rajbangsi and Kamatapuri organisations met at Bongaigaon, adjacent to the Chirang district of the BTAD, and expressed the need to come together for a common struggle for Kamatapur, besides laying the strategy for a sustained agitation.¹⁹ A few collectives of the community in the BTAD have since organised themselves under the Koch Rajbongshi United Forum (KRUF), a conglomerate of around 10 Rajbangsi organisations, to

intensify their stir for a separate state of Kamatapur. The KRUF consists of the All BTAD Koch Rajbongsi Sanmiloni, the All BTAD Koch Rajbongsi Yuba Satra Sanmiloni and the All BTAD Koch-Rajbongshi Mahila Sanmiloni, besides the AKRSU, the AAKRS, the All Koch-Rajbongshi Mahila Samiti, the All Assam Koch Rajbongsi Yuba Satra Sanmiloni, the All Kamatapur Students' Organisation, the Koch-Rajbongshi Sahitya Sabha, and the Koch Rajbongsi Krishi Bikash Parishad. Demanding that a separate state of Kamatapur be carved out of Assam and north Bengal and the Scheduled Tribes status be given to the community, the KRUF held a rally in Kokrajhar on 15 November 2010. It (the rally) culminated in the submission of a memorandum to the Indian prime minister through the deputy commissioner of Kokrajhar district and announced a series of agitation programmes, including a sit-in in New Delhi on 25 November, a 12-hour rail blockade and road blockade on 14 and 27 December, respectively, and a 12-hour Assam–West Bengal *bandh* (general strike) on 30 December (DY365 Bureau 2010). Stray incidents of violence were reported in the course of the rally, as in the course of most of the other programmes of political protest undertaken by the representative organisations of the community. For the most part, though, the community leaders have resorted to democratic means in their demand for a desired constitutional status and a separate homeland.

Meanwhile, a Koch-Rajbangsi militant organisation, the Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), was formed in 1995. It has been demanding, among other things, the formation of a sovereign State of Kamatapur, independent of the Indian Union. Although not very outstanding in terms of cadre or arms strength, the idea of militant nativism that it espouses has earned the KLO considerable support among the community. Many of the overtly political organisations also allegedly have close links with the armed group. The 'post'-colonial history of Assam has shown that the presence of an armed group to represent a particular ethnic community has invariably been a recipe for wide-scale violence sooner or later. This study seeks to explore whether there is any scope for reconciliation between the ethnic groups in conflict before manifest violence breaks out between them.

Conflicts within Communities

As it stands, experience has shown that the conflict-settlement/resolution methods that have been adopted so far have failed to heal

historical wounds between communities. And they seem to have failed in more ways than one if the large-scale violence that continues unabated in BTAD is anything to go by. Some amount of this violence is, of course, the result of the ongoing political agitation launched by the Koch-Rajbangsi community. For the most part, though, this violence is the result of conflicts within the Bodo community in the aftermath of the 2003 settlement.

When elections to the newly created BTAD were announced, the ABSU–BLT combined leadership floated a new political party, the Bodo People's Progressive Front (BPPF), to fight elections from a common platform. However, during the process of selecting candidates to stand in the elections, splits surfaced and factionalism reared its head within the leadership of the community. The party split into two groups not long after its formation – the BPPF headed by U. G. Brahma, a former ABSU leader and parliamentarian, and the BPF headed by Hagrama Mohilary. As a result of the split, newer incidents of violence were witnessed leading up to and during the first elections held in 2005.

Meanwhile, the NDFB, which has been demanding secession from the Indian Union, had always been opposed to the BLT, the surrendered leaders of which group subsequently gained power over the BTC. One of the major reasons for this opposition was that it was widely alleged that the BLT had been propped up by the central government of India to destabilise a regional party-led government in Assam and to foment ethnic conflicts in the state. The NDFB, which was anti-India in its stated intent, thus had a huge ideological difference with the BLT. This difference between the two groups exacerbated after the formation of the BTAD and widespread internecine violence broke out.

Following a further split in the ranks of the NDFB, engineered by the Indian government's call to bring the rebels of the outlawed group to talks, violence between the pro- and anti-talks factions of the NDFB has also been on the rise. The BTAD is today one of the most violent regions in Assam, with more than a 100 persons being killed in the area in 2009 alone (*Dainik Agradoot* 2010). In February 2010, Indian Home Secretary G. K. Pillai was also reported as expressing concern over the large number of illegal arms in currency in the BTAD (*Asomiya Pratidin* 2010a). Most of these arms were retained by former BLT cadres although they had surrendered and been granted amnesty by the government. These weapons found their way to more than 200

youth camps that came up in the BTAD subsequently; and despite efforts by government and security agencies to seize these arms, the exercise does not seem to have been very successful.

Such an atmosphere of continued violence had posed some major challenges for me as I conducted fieldwork primarily in the four districts under the administration of the BTC – Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa (Bagsha), and Udalguri in western and northern Assam.



NOTES

1. Sikkim has been belatedly added as the eighth state of the Northeast. It was annexed to India in 1975. As recently as 2002, the North Eastern Council (Amendment) Act placed it within the ambit of the North Eastern Council (NEC), an advisory body to the Government of India in respect of the development of the Northeastern areas (<http://www.necouncil.nic.in> [accessed 16 January 2011]). For the purpose of this study, only the ‘Seven Sisters’ of the Northeast – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura – will be covered under the notion of the ‘Northeast’.
2. Collective myths and fears shared by ethnic groups often lead to mass- or elite-driven mobilisations that spur ethnic conflict (Kaufman 2001, cited in Bercovich and Jackson 2009: 5). These myths and fears are part of ‘deep culture’, which has been defined as ‘a web of notions about what is true, good, right, beautiful, sacred’ (Galtung 2000: 33). Deep culture ‘is composed of the operating paradigms and cosmology of a society’ (Graf, Kramer and Nicolescou 2007: 132), and especially in protracted conflicts, . . . ‘these deep attitudes and assumptions often work to impede a peaceful end to the conflict, and are the raw materials for the dynamics of escalation and polarization, which are in turn exacerbated by populist and fundamentalist policies. Throughout culture (in religion and ideology, language and art, empirical and formal science) such deep cultural meanings can be identified, and they can be used to legitimize direct or structural force, and are transferred from one generation to the next’ (ibid.).
3. An ethnic community is defined as a collective of people sharing a few commonalities such as a proper name (or identity) to express the ‘essence’ of the community; a myth of ancestry that infuses a sense of ‘kinship’; and the ‘quartet of “myths, memories, values and symbols”’ (Smith 1986: 15). Besides, there is invariably the imagination of a common

homeland, symbolic or otherwise, and a sense of solidarity at least among some sections of the people (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6–7). This solidarity binds certain sections of the people together and ‘entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signalling membership and exclusion’ (Barth 1969: 15).

4. Violence has three dimensions: direct, structural and cultural. Whereas direct violence is ‘an event’, a manifestation, ‘to understand the event one needs to understand the process which led to it’. This involves an understanding of ‘structural violence’ which is ‘generally invisible’ and is ‘the difference between the potential and the actual’. Cultural violence, on the other hand, ‘is the deep-rooted constant which legitimates structural and direct violence, especially when there is a reaction (violent or not) against the structural violence by those who are victims of it’ (Graf, Kramer and Nicolescou 2007: 131). My effort in this book has been to trace the origins of the cultural violence between the ethnic communities in conflict in Assam. I have also attempted to make visible some of the structural violence that might potentially lead to direct violence in future.
5. See Note 4.
6. Under this approach, conflict is used for constructive purposes as ‘an essential catalyst for social change’: ‘The aim then becomes to eliminate the violent and destructive manifestations of conflict that can be traced back to the unmet needs and fears of the conflict parties. The key is to make the parties aware of these underlying needs for identity, security and participation, and then use them to redefine both interests and positions’ (Reimann 2004).
7. The conflict-transformation approach is a step ahead of conflict resolution, and is akin to John Burton’s notion of ‘conflict prevention’ which includes an understanding of the human dimension of conflict.
8. To create cooperative relationships, however, the focus should be on peace, not security. This is because, as Galtung points out, ‘conflict transformation has itself to be peaceful in order not to make the situation worse by sowing new seeds for future violence’ (2007: 14). And herein arises the need for transcendence, or ‘going beyond the goals of the parties, creating a new reality’ (ibid.).
9. ‘Reconciliation can be thought of as the restoration of a state of peace to the relationship, where the entities are at least not harming each other, and can begin to be trusted not to do so in future, which means that revenge is foregone as an option’ (Santa-Barbara 2007: 174).
10. The label ‘autochthonous’ is used here for all communities that claim to be ‘sons of the soil’ of Assam. The Ahom and the Axamiyā-speaking Hindus and Muslims are considered non-indigenous autochthons to distinguish

them from the many 'tribal' communities or indigenous autochthons of the region. The onset of colonial rule has been taken as the dividing line distinguishing the autochthonous populations from the settlers.

11. These include the Assam Peoples Liberation Army (APLA), North Eastern Region Defence Army (NERDA) and Seven Sisters United Liberation Army (SSULA) (Nath 2002).
12. The ULFA claims: 'The struggle for national liberation of Assam never is a separatist [*sic*] or secessionist movement' as 'Assam was never a part of India at any point of time in history. The fact is independent Assam has been occupied by India, and deploying occupation forces they are oppressing our peoples and persecuting them'. See <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434/ulfa.htm> (accessed 16 January 2011).
13. The former chairperson, foreign secretary, finance secretary, as well as a host of other second-rung leaders of the organisation have been apprehended or have surrendered. They have now entered into peace talks with the Indian government.
14. The 'language riots' between the Axamiyā-speaking and the non-Axamiyā speaking people of Assam, which took place in the years immediately after the Official Languages Act, produced the 'first martyr of the mother language' in Ranjit Barpujari, an Axamiyā Hindu student killed in police firing in 1960. In the following year, 11 Bengali-speaking people were killed in Silchar (cf. Baruah 1999: 105).
15. Such grammatical, syntactical and idiomatic errors in the English language, as are present in this quote, are characteristic of much of the political literature emanating from Assam in English in recent decades.
16. See http://www.neportal.org/northeastfiles/Assam/ActsOrdinances/Bodoland_Autonomous_Council_Act_1993.asp (accessed 17 January 2011).
17. The NDFB uses the spelling 'Boro' instead of 'Bodo' in its representation of the community. The ABSU pamphlet 'Why Separate State?' distinguishes between the terms Bodo and Boro, the latter including only the 'purely Bodo speaking people although some sections may have forgotten their Bodo language' and the former then referring to 'all Kochari or Bodo groups of people such as Boro, Rabha, Koch, Garo, Sonowal, Lalung, Deori, Dimasa, Saraniya, Barman, Hojai, Hajong, Tripuri (Tipperah), Chutiya and Moran whose languages are very close to Boro or Bara' (ABSU 1987b).
18. Full text of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution with Amendments, available at <http://lawmin.nic.in/coi/SIXTH-SCHEDULE.pdf> (accessed 30 June 2011).
19. See <http://www.kamatapur.com/node/73> (accessed 17 January 2011).

PART I

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One

Conflicts Within, Conflicts Without *Communities and Concepts*



The ethnographic survey that was part of the People of India project launched by the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) in 1985 identified 115 communities as residing in Assam (Bardoloi and Athaparia 2003).¹ Since it is not possible to consider all these different communities and the relationships/conflicts between all or even some of them within the scope of one study, I have confined myself to exploring the relations – historical, political and socio-cultural on the one hand, and conflictive and cooperative on the other – between three particular communities of Assam: the Axamiyā, the Bodo and the Koch communities.²

COMMUNITIES IN CONFLICT

The nuances associated with the Axamiyā identity are many and need to be dealt with in depth. In doing so, however, one would have to grapple with the fact that there is no established or official definition of what comprises ‘Axamiyā’. The prevalence of many disputes regarding the markers of this identity is another major problem. I have undertaken this difficult task in the next chapter. Here, brief ethnographic sketches of the Bodo and Koch communities alone have been included.

Bodo

The Bodos are the largest plains tribe of Assam,³ with 1,352,771 persons in the state being classified as Bodo-speaking in the 2001 Census of India (Census Data 2001a). This puts them at 40.9 per cent of the total Scheduled Tribe⁴ population of Assam. The Bodos are spread over much of the state, but are predominant in the northern bank

of the Brahmaputra valley. They are an indigenous community and one of the earliest known autochthons of Assam belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family. The Tibeto-Burmans include communities such as the Koch, Rabha, Garo, Mech-Kachari, Sonowal-Kachari, Dimasa-Kachari, Bodo-Kachari, Lalung (Tiwa), and Tripuri. All these communities were identified as belonging to the 'Bodo language group' by colonial ethnographer B. H. Hodgson (Grierson 1967 [1909]). Over the centuries, however, the self-definition of the Bodos has shrunk to include only the Bodo-Kacharis, and even the 'Kachari' appellation has been renounced in recent decades as having a derogatory connotation.

The term 'Kachari' undoubtedly refers to those belonging to or coming from Cachar, the area in the south of Assam where people of the Bodo language group are surmised to have been historically clustered (Endle 1881: i). The Kacharis ruled over a vast area till the coming of the Ahoms, when their might began to dwindle. Their present concentration in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley has been attributed to many causes. The earliest Bodo inhabitants of the valley seem to have settled down in the Duar areas, which are the foothill regions of the Bhutan hills bordering Assam proper – or the 'erstwhile Ahom territory' (Guha 1977: 10). Sidney Endle conjectures that two branches of the Bodo people came into the Brahmaputra valley,

one entering North-East Bengal and Western Assam through the valley of the Tista, Dharla, Sankosh, & c., and founding there what was formerly the powerful kingdom of Kamarupa; and the other making its way through the Subansiri, Dibong, and Dihong valleys into eastern Assam, where a branch of the widespread Kachari race, known as Chutiyas, undoubtedly held sway for a lengthened period. (1990 [1911]: 4)

More recent and historically verifiable accounts attribute the clustering of the Bodo people in the northern bank of the Brahmaputra to an exodus from Assam proper following misgovernment in the heyday of the Ahom rule and Burmese atrocities during the occupation of Assam from 1780 to 1826. This explanation was put forward by David Scott, the first commissioner of Assam; and in his *A Statistical Account of Assam*, vol. 2, W. W. Hunter (1998 [1879]: 117–18) corroborates it. He says that the Meches of northeast Bengal – known

as ‘Cachari (Kachari) in Assam’ – and of the eastern Duars ‘are, by all accounts, recent immigrants’ (ibid.: 118).

Based on the first reliable census conducted in Assam in 1872, Hunter (1998 [1879]) listed the Kachari population of the westernmost district of colonial Assam, namely, Goalpara (of which the Eastern Duars were a part), as standing at 22,755. Adding the number of Mech people to this, the total Kachari population stood at 52,632 (Hunter 1998 [1879]: 37). In the Eastern Duars, Hunter wrote in his ‘A Statistical Account of the District of Goalpara (Including the Eastern Dwars)’, ‘they are still more numerous’ (ibid.). He listed the Kacharis in the colonial Kamrup district as being among the ‘aboriginal tribes’ that are ‘most conspicuous’, and put their number at 76,994 (Hunter 1982 [1879]: 29–30). In the district of Darrang, their number stood at 62,214 (ibid.: 113).

Census figures, however, cannot be relied upon exclusively to ascertain the actual number of Bodo people in Assam. The reason for this is that a large number of people from the community have, over the centuries, adopted Hinduism and assimilated with the neighbouring Axamiyā Hindus, at times even adopting Axamiyā caste names and mentioning their mother tongue as Axamiyā in census enumerations. This tendency had been noted even in the 19th century by Hunter, who said of the Kacharis: ‘In the Eastern Dwars they are fast becoming Hinduized, and converts seem to have little difficulty in being accepted as brethren among the Rajbangsis and mongrel Hindus’ (1998 [1879]: 118).

As this tendency accelerated, the Bodos enumerated in subsequent censuses were much less than the actual population, the difference being lost to Hinduisation. It is only since the 1980s, with the growth of a conscious political attempt among the community to reverse the assimilative process, that there has been a steady increase in the number of Bodo people enumerated. Thus, the number of Bodo speakers recorded in Assam grew from 556,576 in 1971 to 1,221,881 in 1991 (Census Data 2001c).⁵ In Kokrajhar district alone, which was the heart of Bodo ethnic resurgence, there was an increase of a little over 60 per cent in the number of Bodo-speaking people between 1971 and 1991 (Deputy Director, Department of Economics and Statistics, Kokrajhar 1998). A small percentage of this increase has also been attributed to the migration of Bodo families from other parts of Assam into Kokrajhar and its adjoining areas during the period

owing to the political climate of the time (field interviews). In fact, such small-scale migratory movements have been noticed all over the northern bank of the Brahmaputra, and many Bodo families living in the Udalguri and Sonitpur districts of present-day Assam claim to have migrated from the western districts in recent decades for various reasons (field interviews).

Traditionally, the Bodos are practitioners of an indigenous faith called Bathou. A large section of the Bodos, however, converted to Hinduism over the centuries, mainly under the influence of Axamiyā Vaishnavism, and came to be known as the Xarania Kacharis. Another major influence of the Hindu religion on the Bodos was that of the Brahma movement, a simplified form of Hinduism preached in Bengal since the early 20th century. In the second decade of the same century, Kalicharan Brahma, a Bodo trader, started to convert large numbers of Bodo people to his brand of Brahmaisim, which wedded elements of the indigenous Bathou with Bengali Brahmaisim.

Meanwhile, Christianity entered Northeast India in 1836 when two American Baptist missionaries set up a mission in Sadiya in easternmost Assam. By the 1850s, they had spread their influence westwards up to Guwahati and other parts of the Brahmaputra valley. However, the aftermath of the revolt of 1857 saw anti-Christian sentiments spreading fast and growing stronger among the general population of Assam. Feeling insecure now, 'the Baptist leaders saw this clearly that they should make the hills and the tribal people the field and aim of their activity for quicker and more massive results' (Neog 1983: 60–61). The tea plantations with their huge number of Adivasi recruits became one of their important destinations (*ibid.*). These tea-garden regions also had a sizeable Bodo-Kachari population, the Kachari people having been employed as tea-plantation workers by the European owners before the Adivasi influx (Guha 1977: 15). In the 'important tea-planting district of Darrang', a Kachari mission was set up, and missionaries such as Rev. Sidney Endle, who had been closely associated with it since 1864, converted the Kacharis here in large numbers and set up schools and other institutions in the area (Endle 1990 [1911]: xii–xiv). Christianity thus made its entry into the Bodo community. Of course, the numerical strength of the Christian people among the Bodos is not very large. In fact, of the entire ST population of Assam, only 8.8 per cent are Christians.

Koch-Rajbangsi

Various theories relating to the origins of the Koch-Rajbangsi community of Assam have been put forward, but most agree that they belong to the same racial/ethnic stock as the Bodos; through conversion of caste, religion and class, the Koches as a distinct people were constructed, and they came to occupy the lower strata of caste Hindu society that allowed easy membership. However, some, such as W. W. Hunter, have claimed that 'all converts from other aboriginal or semi-aboriginal tribes are included among them' (1998 [1879]: 119–20). E. A. Gait is of the opinion that 'Koch' is 'a term of some ambiguity. In Assam proper it has become the name of a Hindu caste, into which are received the converts to Hinduism from the ranks of the Kachari, Lalung, Mikir and other tribes' (2001 [1905]: 47).

This latter theory of the origin of 'Koch' has been used by linguists studying the language of the Rajbangsis to account for its dialectical variations. It is also used to explain the differences in the nomenclatures of these dialects in the different places where the language continues to be spoken, including Bangladesh and in India, 'in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, and Darjeeling of West Bengal, and the western borders of the districts of Goalpara and the Garo Hills of Assam (including Bahe, spoken in Darjeeling)' (Voegelin and Voegelin 1977: 167).

The various nomenclatures of the language and its dialects have been identified as Kamata Bihari (Barma 1991), Kamrupa/i, Koch, Rangpuri, Bahe, Surjapuri, Dekhia, and Dekhri (Clark 1970; Toulmin 2006), the confusion arising from the fact that

many in these groups refer to themselves by other names, or that other groups, sometimes amounting to subcastes, exist within the larger limits of the Rājbangshi group. It may be impossible to assemble an exhaustive list of these alternate names and subcastes, but a considerable number exist in the literature. (Clark 1970: 61)

While the Koch-Rajbangsis also inhabit parts of present-day Nepal and Bangladesh, in India, they are concentrated in western Assam and north Bengal. In discussing the aboriginal tribes of 'Bengal, the Central Provinces, and the Eastern Frontier', George Campbell had written of the Cooches (Koches):

Most of the civilized Cooches . . . (u)nder the name of Rajbunsees, Pullees, &c., people nearly allied to these form a large proportion of the population of the great districts of Rungpore and Dinagepore, as well as of Julpigoree, Goalpara, and parts of Assam. They are also found in the Dacca and Mymensing districts. Probably then these people form the main stock of the population of North-Eastern Bengal and Lower Assam, as well as of all the lower eastern hills. (1874: 3)

The Koch kingdom having been spread over most of these regions, members of the community are still found to be living in these areas. In fact, even before the rise and fall of the Koch kingdom in the 16th century AD, this entire region was known as the Kamata kingdom or Kamatapur, a vast kingdom ruled by successive dynasties since the 13th century AD. The Koch kings took pride in being the Kamteswars, or rulers of Kamata, a title they assumed on ascending the throne. The Koch-Rajbangsis therefore pride themselves on their Kamata heritage and consider Kamatapur to be their lost homeland.

The 'Rajbangsi' appellation was belatedly added to the ethnic nomenclature 'Koch', and it literally means 'of royal lineage'. It has been surmised that some Koches adopted this appellation in an effort to align themselves with the Koch rulers of Kamatapur. This was also their means of scaling higher up the caste ladder, as they could not gain admittance to the higher echelons of the caste-Hindu society despite detribalisation, which involves, 'among other things, a renunciation of tribal forms of worship and the acceptance of traditional Hindu gods and goddesses' (Lahiri 1990: 166). Another means of achieving the same was assimilation into the Hindu societies of Assam and Bengal, which occurred to the extent that a majority of them gave up their language – or as Campbell (1874: 3) puts it, 'lost their language' – and adopted Axamiyā and Bengali as their mother tongues. Thus, only 8,451 Koch speakers were enumerated in Assam in 2001 (Census Data 2001b). In Bengal, referring to Brian Hodgson's essay on the language, Hunter had asserted a long time back: 'The original structure of the language of Kocch had been so completely overlaid with Aryan forms that it was merged into a corrupt Bengali' (1896: 291).

In Assam, a vast majority of the Koches have also assumed Axamiyā caste names (Prabhakara 1983a). As a result, they are nearly indistinguishable from the caste Hindu Axamiyā. Such near-total assimilation has been a major obstacle in the Koch-Rajbangsi community getting recognition as a Scheduled Tribe under the Constitution of

India, although a political movement to get themselves incorporated as such is underway.

The Koch-Rajbangsis of Assam have inhabited the northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley for centuries. As Hunter says, 'The Rajbangsis are believed to have formerly inhabited the lower ranges of hills, and to have descended into the plains some two hundred years ago, being pushed forward by the people behind' (1998 [1879]: 119). Descending from these hills, they presumably settled down in the Duar areas, including the Eastern Duars and the foothill areas of the colonial Kamrup and Darrang districts. Some also came further inland. Based on the 1872 census, Hunter (1998 [1879]: 42) estimated that there were about 118,091 Koch people in the district of Goalpara. In the Eastern Duars, according to the data collected during the settlement operations of 1870, they were less numerous, with only 2,400 adult males being enumerated (*ibid.*: 117).

Significantly though, the *raikats/zamindars* (feudal lords), rajas and petty chieftains who ruled over the various Duars were mostly Koch or Rajbangsi (Hamilton 1987). Many of these petty rulers were in fact descendants of the mighty Koch kings who originated in Darrang but spread their might westwards till they ruled over all of central and western Assam and many parts of Bengal as well (Choudhury 2007). Once dominant in Darrang, by the time of the first colonial enumeration exercise in 1872, their numbers stood at 46,788 in the district, out of a total population of 236,009 (Hunter 1982 [1879]: 114–17). In Kamrup, which was once a part of the Koch kingdom, the number of Koch-Rajbangsis was 69,277 (*ibid.*: 33).

By 1989, these three districts of Goalpara, Darrang and Kamrup had been broken down to nine, and in a representation to the Expert Committee on Plain Tribes of Assam (ECOPTA) in 1991, the Assam Council for Defense of Integration claimed that numerically the Koch tribe amounts to 'more or less 50 *lakhs* (50,00,000)' of the population in these nine districts of the north bank of the Brahmaputra valley (Singh, Singh and Gokhale 1992).

Choice of Communities

The choice of these communities has mainly been dictated by the fact that tracing the relationship between them over the course of Assam's history can help us understand how intricate and often intertwined the process of ethnic and national identity formation can be. Despite

such close ethnic proximity, the fact that ethnic differentiation takes place and conflicts arise, are created and exacerbated between them demonstrates the complexity of the politics behind the process. The Bodos and the Koch-Rajbangsis, as the preceding sections make abundantly clear, are close ethnic kin. The two communities also contributed to a large extent towards the formation of the Axamiyā identity, as the next chapter will show. However, forces of history and compulsions of politics caused the ties between the communities to rupture. I intend to trace these forces and compulsions in an effort to understand the process in a more nuanced manner. Three communities with such close historical, ethnological and cultural ties, and which have traversed the entire gamut of coexistence – domination, assimilation, reversal of assimilation, conversion, conflict, and political reconciliation – undoubtedly make for the best cases to study.

What is more, they provide the scholar with the opportunity to not just study the dynamics of conflicts between the communities but also to explore how these conflicts and State and non-State interventions have created other, more complex dynamics of intra-community conflictive relationships. In the case of the Koch community's relationship with the Bodo and Axamiyā communities, the conflicts are yet to conflagrate beyond a certain point. Many of the differences are as yet latent, but if they are not addressed urgently and with empathy and promptness, they may lead to the kind of violent manifest conflict that has characterised the Axamiyā–Bodo relations for decades now. No study of ethnic relationships in Assam will be complete without an exploration of these latent conflicts and the means to diffuse them.

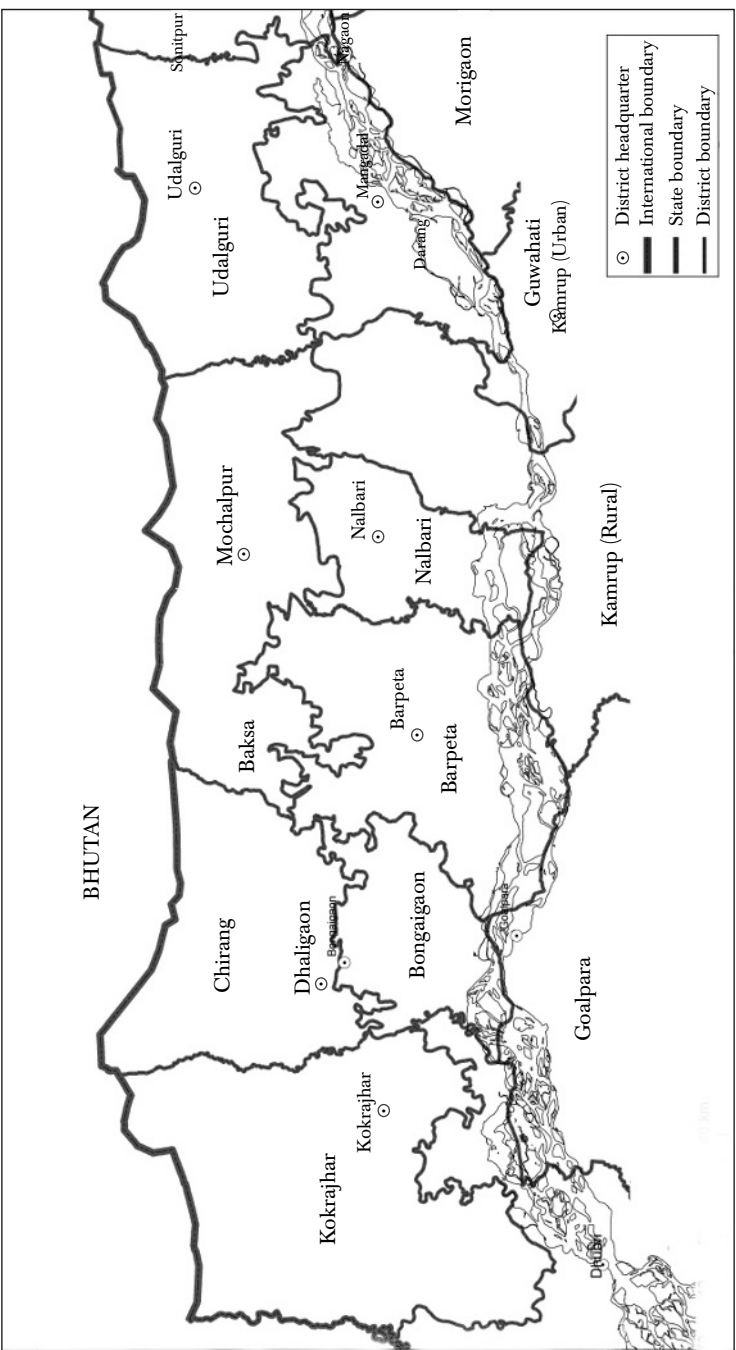
RESEARCHING CONFLICTS

The Case Study Area

This book is based on field research conducted in the four districts of the BTAD (see Map 1.1). It begins, though, with an effort to trace the political and administrative history of the case study area where, I felt, the seeds of many of the present conflicts lay.⁶

The BTAD was formed in 2003. In pre-colonial times, the four districts comprising the BTAD formed parts of the Darrang, Kamrup and Kamata kingdoms, boundaries of which often overlapped as annexations and secessions of parts of these kingdoms took place

Map 1.1: Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD)



Source: Sarat Phukan, Gauhati University. Map not to scale.

over the centuries. A historical understanding of these kingdoms and the areas they covered is important because the homeland demands that have cropped up in recent decades often refer to and are derived from them.

The origins of the kingdom of Kamrup have become misty through mythological recreations and interpolations, but its political history is clearer since the 4th century AD (Gait 2001 [1905]: 22). From the accounts of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang, who travelled to ancient Kamrup at the height of its glory in the 7th century AD, it has been surmised that the kingdom stretched between the Karatoya river (currently in Bangladesh) in the west and the Chinese frontier in the east. The traveller's accounts suggest that

it must have included the whole of Assam (except perhaps the Naga hills, Lushai hills and Manipur) and also Bhutan, North Bengal as far west as Karatoya, and the part of Mymensingh which lies to the east of the old course of the Brahmaputra. (Ibid.: 30)

From the accounts of successive Muslim invaders of Kamrup and from the Ahom Buranjis (which are the official histories of the Ahom kings), it becomes clear that by the 14th century, although Karatoya remained the western boundary, several independent kingdoms had sprung up. This included the kingdoms of the Chutiyas in the east (to the south and south-east of which were small Bodo tribes that 'enjoyed a precarious independence'), and the Kacharis on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, extending 'at least half-way across the Nowgong district'. West of the Kachari kingdom and north of the Chutiya on the south bank were petty chiefs called Bhuiyas who were independent of each other but occasionally joined forces against a common enemy (Gait 2001 [1905]: 38–39). Sometime between the 13th and 15th centuries AD, 'the whole tract up to the Karatoya seems still, as a rule, to have formed a single kingdom, but the name had been changed from Kamarupa to Kamata' (ibid.: 43).

Muslim historians of the period often used the words synonymously, while the Buranjis began to record wars between the Ahom kings and the Kamata Raja. The Khen kings – who had their capital at Kamatapur on the banks of the Dharla river (now in Bangladesh) and 'did not apparently exercise control over more than a very small part of the old kingdom of Kamarupa' – are the earliest rulers of Kamatapur of whom there exists any 'connected account'. During

their rule and later, when the kingdom was seized by the Muslim ruler Husain Shah, Kamatapur seems to have stretched between the Karatoya river and the Bar Nadi (literally, big river), which was later to mark the boundary between the colonial Kamrup and Darrang districts. Leaving his son at Hajo (in modern-day Kamrup district) as governor of the conquered territory, Husain Shah withdrew from Kamata soon thereafter. But not very long after that, his entire army had to retreat and he lost all of the conquered territory when attempts to annex the Ahom territory were routed. Till the rise of the Koch kingdom in the 16th century, 'there was, for a time, no king of the whole country, which was ruled by a number of petty independent chiefs' (Gait 2001 [1905]: 44–46).

These petty chiefs, also known as Bhuiyas, were defeated by Bisu, the founder of the Koch kingdom in Kamatapur. Bisu assumed the name of Bisva Singha upon ascension and made Cooch Behar his capital. His son Naranarayan succeeded him as king and at the height of his powers, extended the Koch kingdom by defeating the Ahom, Kachari and other contemporary kings with the help of his brother and able general, Chilarai. After Chilarai's death, the kingdom was divided between Naranarayan and Chilarai's son Raghu Deb. The two kingdoms subsequently came to be known as Koch Bihar (now Cooch Behar), which lay beyond the western bank of the Sankosh river that flows down from Bhutan to modern-day Kokrajhar and Koch Hajo on the east. Although the name and vestiges of Koch Bihar still survive, the only trace of the Koch Hajo kingdom, as Gait points out, remains 'in the town called Hajo, a few miles north of Gauhati' (2001 [1905]: 49–57).

Raghu Deb's kingdom included parts of the colonial Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara districts as well as parts of Mymensingh, now in Bangladesh. After Naranarayan's death, his son Lakshmi Narayan ascended the throne and became a vassal of the Mughal empire in the west. When Raghu Deb died, his son Parikshit tried building friendly relations with the Ahom kingdom in the east. As the relationship between the Koch cousins worsened, the Ahoms and Mughals were called in to help. The Mughals managed to extend their influence as far as Hajo by 1616. However, the Ahoms stepped in to defeat the Mughals and reinstalled Parikshit's brother, Dharma Narayan, as their vassal. Dharma Narayan was made the tributary king of Darrang, and he assisted the Ahoms in various attempts to oust the Mughals. By

1638, the Mughals had established themselves west of the Bar Nadi, while a part of the erstwhile Koch Hajo kingdom – Darrang – was placed under Dharma Narayan's son, Sundar Narayan, by the Ahoms (Gait 2001 [1905]: 63–70).

From this time the eastern Koch kings can no longer be regarded as independent rulers. They still administered a tract, which was more or less coterminous with the Mangaldai sub-division [in Darrang], but they did so as subordinates of the Ahoms... The western Koch kings continued to rule as vassals of the Muhammadans; and their kingdom still survives, though with narrower limits, in the modern State of Koch Bihar. But their territory lay to the west of the Sankosh and did not include any part of the country which is now comprised within the limits of Assam. (Ibid.: 70)

It was this 'modern State' of Cooch Behar that was made a native state of British India by a treaty in 1773 (Barpujari 2003: 301). By the Cooch Behar Merger Agreement of 28 August 1949, it became a part of the Indian Union in 1949–50, when it was merged with West Bengal to be administered as a district within that state (S. D. Hazarika 2002).

Among the Koch kings left ruling over Darrang as tributary kings to the Ahoms, internal feuds and dissatisfaction against the Ahom monarchs arose and grew. Following fratricidal disputes, the rulership of the kingdom was split between the *burhā* (senior) and the *dekā* (junior) rajas. Darrang Raja Krishnanarayan complained that the Ahom king had appropriated the rule of Kamrup to himself, when formerly there had been no distinction between the 'rajaship' of Kamrup and Darrang (Barpujari 2003: 295). The people of Darrang also rose in rebellion against the Ahom administration as they were labouring under huge tax burdens and an unprecedented influx of migrants from the Ahom territory following the outbreak of the Moamoria revolt. Amidst all such disturbances within the kingdom, when the Darrang Rajas were called upon by the Ahom rulers to fight against the Moamorias, the former were instead induced to take side with the rebels, who promised them a larger territory. The Darrang Rajas also entered into a conspiracy with the Choudhury of Jikari to drive out the Ahom rulers from Kamrup and Darrang altogether. The plot was unsuccessful and the allies were defeated near Mangaldai. Krishnanarayan, the legitimate heir, was sidelined and Bishnunarayan, the nephew of the former *dekā* raja, was made king (ibid.: 295–96).

Krishnanarayan then appealed to the British rulers of Cooch Behar for help, and they allowed him to recruit mercenaries in the form of *burkandazes* (guards), *sannyasis* (Hindu ascetics) and *fakirs* (Muslim ascetics) who entered Assam and wreaked havoc on the weakened Ahom kingdom while aggravating the anarchical situation. Krishnanarayan managed to wrest back control of Darrang in 1791 and even occupied North Guwahati. The Ahom monarch finally decided to enter into an understanding with the Darrang Raja, but the menace of the mercenaries continued and a settlement, though agreeable to both kings, could not be reached. Repeated petitions by the Ahom king to the British government to recall the mercenaries bore fruit in 1792, when the latter conceded that since the disturbances were 'principally occasioned by gangs of vagabonds belonging to Bengal', it was 'particularly called upon to make some exertions to quell them'. A small contingent under the command of Captain Thomas Welsh was dispatched to Assam, prompted by 'motives of humanity' as well as 'a wish to be better informed of the interior state of Assam, its commerce, etc.' (Barpujari 2003: 297–306).

By 1793, Captain Welsh had successfully expelled most of the mercenaries and reinstalled the Darrang Raja to his kingdom after a long fight put on by the latter from the foothills of Duars between Darrang and Bhutan. He was recalled in 1794 and the political climate of Assam continued to be in the throes of anarchy (Barpujari 2003: 311–17). Subsequently, the Burmese kings were called upon to send military aid and they sent successive armies till they 'obtained complete mastery of Assam'. The main aim of the Burmese rulers was to plunder the wealth of Assam and to that end, they levied oppressive taxes, and even tortured the people and committed excesses in the name of tax collection (*ibid.*: 342–52).

The Burmese were finally driven out of Assam by the British, who took control of Assam from the former through the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Colonial rule had come to Assam. As it consolidated its administration, the former glorious kingdoms were reduced to districts in what was initially a part of the Bengal province but was, by 1874, made into the Chief Commissioner's province of Assam. Assam in the 19th century, under the British, comprised the six districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon, Sivasagar, and Lakhimpur. Of these, the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang are of importance to this study, as portions of these districts have gone into the makings of the four districts of the BTAD.

The colonial Kamrup district, divided into North Kamrup and South Kamrup, was 'situated on either side of the Bhramapootra'. North Kamrup, which is of specific interest in this study, was bounded on the north and south by the mountains of Bhutan and the Brahmaputra river respectively, and on the east and west by the Bar Nadi and the Manas rivers respectively; beyond the Bar Nadi lay Darrang district and beyond the Manas, Goalpara (Moffatt-Mills 1983 [1853]: 316).

Darrang district was bounded on the north by the mountains of Bhutan as well as the mountain ranges inhabited by the Akas and Daflas – present-day Arunachal Pradesh. Along the south boundary was the Brahmaputra, on the east was the Kalijan river and on the west, the Bar Nadi. The district was divided into five divisions: the plain areas of 'Desh Darrang' and 'Desh Chooteah', and the foothill or Duar areas of 'Char Dowar', 'Now Dowar' and 'Dowar Chatgaree'. To these were added in 1844, the Bhutan Duars of 'Dowar Koriah Parah', 'Dowar Baree Goomah' and 'Dowar Khilling' (Moffatt-Mills 1983 [1853]: 399–401).

Of all the three districts, however, Goalpara has seen the most changes made in its administrative make-up. Colonial presence in Goalpara dates back to 1765, the year the British acquired revenue rights over Bengal from the Mughals. In 1822, Goalpara (and the Garo Hills, which are now part of the Northeast Indian state of Meghalaya) was made a district called North-East Rangpur. In 1826, when the British took over the administration of Assam, the commissioner and judicial commissioner of Assam took charge of Goalpara. In 1866, the Eastern Duars (Bijni, Sidli, Chirang, Ripu, and Guma) were annexed to Goalpara, and the entire district was placed under the commissioner of the Cooch Behar division, to which the Western Duars had also been added. But soon after, in 1868, civil and criminal jurisdiction was transferred back to the judicial commissioner of Assam. In 1874, Assam was formed as a Chief Commissioner's province, and Goalpara was made into an integral part of Assam (Hunter 1998 [1879]: 18). It remained within the territory of Assam till 1905, when Bengal was partitioned and Goalpara was made a part of East Bengal, while parts of East Bengal were yoked to Assam. However, much protest and agitation followed the reshuffling of the boundaries of Bengal, and in 1912, Goalpara was brought back under the administration of Assam province, where it has remained ever since.

In colonial Assam, Goalpara – or undivided Goalpara, as it is now referred to in order to differentiate it from the current, much-reduced area that comprises the Goalpara district of Assam today – was thus a sizeable administrative unit comprising the Eastern Duars, the Garo Hills and the rest of its original territory grouped into *parganas* under Mughal rule. It comprised most of western Assam, with the Brahmaputra bifurcating it in the north–south direction.

This sizeable district shrunk in size in 1983, when the district map of Assam was redrawn, and the district of Kokrajhar came into being. In the same year, the district areas of Kamrup and Darrang also shrunk considerably; the Sonitpur district was formed from parts of Darrang; the Barpeta district was created from a part of Kamrup, and subsequently in 1985, the Nalbari district was also carved out of the erstwhile area of Kamrup. A further reshuffling of administrative boundaries in 1989 led to nearly 40 per cent of the area of Kokrajhar being incorporated into the newly created district of Bongaigaon. The rest of the area of Bongaigaon came from the erstwhile Barpeta district.

In 2003, when the latest reshuffle of administrative boundaries took place, Kokrajhar district was further divided into Kokrajhar and Chirang – and these two new districts of the BTAD now included portions of the post-1989 districts of Bongaigaon, Barpeta and Dhubri. Meanwhile, Baksa district was formed incorporating parts of Nalbari and Kamrup districts, while Udalguri included parts of the erstwhile Darrang district (for the latest district map of Assam, see Map 1.2).

Choice of Case Study Area

I chose this area for fieldwork because of the concentration of a large number of Bodo, Axamiyā and Koch people there. As the historical overview of the area has shown, since pre-colonial times, there has been an overlap of administrative and political influences in the region, which has also been inhabited by communities of varied ethnic backgrounds. In fact, the demographic overlap has been such that when the BAC Accord was drawn up in 1993, it failed precisely because no area under the proposed Bodoland region could meet the criteria set forth by the accord, namely that only those villages having 50 per cent or more of tribal population could be included in the BAC. The result was that armed nativist militants went about trying to create the requisite majority by resorting to ethnic cleansing. The BTAD, as a result, has been one of the most politically volatile zones of Assam and also the most conflict-prone.

Map 1.2: District Map of Assam



Source: Sarat Phukan, Gauhati University. Map not to scale.

Moreover, the Kamatapur imagination of the Koch-Rajbangsis and the political demand for a Bodo homeland have overlapping cartographies, and both fall within the case study area, thus making it a fertile ground for the outbreak of sporadic violence. What is more, in the first place, the *raison d'être* of the area as an administrative unit is the protracted Axamiyā-Bodo conflict discussed earlier. It was created as a means to resolve that conflict – studying its current situation and internal problems would also help analyse the successes and shortcomings of the conflict-resolution methods adopted by the State.

CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL RESEARCH IN THE NORTHEAST

Some major problems presented themselves to me during the course of field visits, and these were mostly relating to the difficulty of functioning in a conflict zone.

Fieldwork in a Conflict Zone

For the most part, I relied on ethnographic field research.⁷ My first visit to any place in the BTAD was in 2005, to the westernmost districts of Kokrajhar and Chirang. The national highway that bifurcates these two adjoining districts was often locally referred to as the 'India-Pakistan border', drawing a parallel with the sustained animosity between the two countries (field interviews). In this case, the parties at war were the NDFB and ex-BLT cadres, many of whom retained their illegal firearms despite their official surrender. Though no official records of this are available, it was a conclusion easily drawn at the time from the frequent clashes that took place. The sporadic violence was also accompanied by an atmosphere of constant political uncertainty and quotidian insecurity for the people on the streets. For instance, sudden calls for *bandhs* by either the armed groups or civil-society organisations or political parties were common, and one could only afford to ignore word-of-mouth *bandh* calls at one's own risk.

Free movement and meetings with the various actors involved are naturally restricted under such circumstances, and controlled by the depth of the knowledge of the scholar about the nuances in local politics, the various players and factions involved in this politics, and her resourcefulness and ability to instill confidence among the subjects

being interviewed, observed or analysed. In the field, information-gathering is always dependent on the scholar's management of the 'sponsors and gatekeepers'.⁸ In the BTAD, the new band of 'sponsors and gatekeepers' were mostly the ex-BLT cadres, who were now the political leadership of the community. Some of them were openly hostile to my initial approaches. One particularly feared ex-insurgent, in fact, questioned why I would want to dig into conflicts which were now 'resolved'. Such gatekeepers are particularly concerned about being portrayed in a favourable light and wish 'to safeguard what they perceive as their legitimate interests' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995 [1983]: 66). In this case, the political spoils of militancy and conflict. At the same time, of course, there were also sponsors who welcomed me into their midst – intellectuals, village headmen and the local people from all the different communities – people who were apparently keen that the underlying conflicts should be resolved so that the quotidian violence could end.

It is the researcher's job to navigate through the varied concerns of those who control access to information and procure an objective, non-biased picture. In order to gain such objectivity, however, I had to approach different segments or factions of the society under study. This meant dealing with different groups of gatekeepers and sponsors, each of which had their own agenda. For example, a seemingly non-partisan intellectual could very well have been the unofficial ideologue of a particular insurgent group. It was essential for me, then, to be aware of the said intellectual's political and ideological leanings before approaching her. In a highly polarised conflict zone, where multiple actors are vying for legitimacy and control, the task of managing the various sponsors and gatekeepers becomes that much more difficult for the researcher.

In the course of fieldwork, I set up base in Kokrajhar town, which is the capital of the BTAD and largely controlled by the ex-BLT camp. I then made frequent excursions into the neighbouring areas, and sometimes inadvertently crossed over to the NDFB-controlled side, mostly in the Bhutan foothills to extremely isolated areas. Besides the suspicion of the Bodo political leaders and insurgents, this also managed, at times, to draw the attention of the local authorities: police officers and civil servants. But despite facing some amount of initial resistance, as the field visits continued over the years, interaction and acceptance became much easier. Nevertheless, handling the expectations of the hosts – gatekeepers and sponsors as well as the

other people among whom I spent time and with whom I interacted – regarding my identity and intentions was not so easy. Martyn Hammerseley and Paul Atkinson (1995 [1983]: 77) have described how ‘two closely related models of the researcher tend to predominate in this context, “the expert” and “the critic”’. Although it is not easy to live with either of these two projected images, I was faced by a third, more disconcerting expectation while meeting with the victims of violent conflicts. At the various relief camps housing internally displaced people (IDPs)⁹ affected by the ethnic clashes in the area, I was confronted with the unmerited and utterly misplaced expectation of the camp inmates that my work would be able to ‘do something’ and intervene on their behalf to better their sorry lots.

Over and above facing such dilemma and managing the challenges of information-gathering, working in a conflict zone also imposed upon me the responsibility to exercise caution not just for my personal well-being and safety, but also for that of my interviewees and informants. A narrowly avoided bomb blast in Kokrajhar town, a personal threat by an ex-militant to ‘better leave it alone’ and sudden scurries for shelter at the news of a flash *bandh* called by one or the other faction of armed insurgents or ex-militants are just some of the perils I faced while working in the BTAD. Besides, there were logistical difficulties involved in conducting field research in a conflict zone. Transportation is the most obvious of these – in numerous interviews, political activists and student leaders candidly admitted setting up blockades on highways and assaulting travellers during troubled times. There have also been instances of miscreants pulling passengers out of public-transport buses and brutally killing them; one such incident had occurred – though not in the BTAD – during the Karbi–Dimasa ethnic riots in the Karbi Anglong district in southern Assam in 2005.

However, as a researcher/scholar who was not a permanent resident of the case study area, I could afford to remove myself when confronted by a threat I could not face. But for any political *faux pas* or lapse of judgement, however naïve, on my part, my informants who did reside in the area would have been the ones to face the consequences. This was a lesson brought home by an initial unannounced visit to an Adivasi relief camp in Chirang district during the course of my field-work. The camp had been established for people who had been internally displaced as a result of the ethnic-cleansing exercises undertaken

by Bodo militants earlier in 1998. Besides raising the suspicions of NDFB militants standing guard on the approach road to the camp, I could also sense the fear that such an unexplained and unprecedented visit had created among the inmates of the camp, already brutalised and subjected to inhuman sufferings. I realised then that a researcher needs to be constantly aware of the ethics of fieldwork while working in a conflict zone.

State and the Security Regime

Encounters with non-State armed actors can thus jeopardise the safety of the researcher and her informants in a conflict zone. However, in a highly militarised and sensitive area like Assam, and in the Northeast as a whole, the State machinery and its various agencies are also equally wary of social researchers working in the region. More than one highly placed security official agreed in the course of interviews conducted in Guwahati that I, like all researchers, non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers and activists functioning in the Northeast, 'must have been' under some kind of surveillance. In the process of the State's covert counter-insurgency operations, the academic and researcher also gets implicated. Under the circumstances, how is one to gather data, question informants and collect testimonies without jeopardising the sources, or sacrificing independent functioning?

At the same time, in its continued covert operations against militants, the State encourages co-option of the intellectuals, journalists and civil-society leaders; and the sudden acquisition of wealth or rise to eminent positions of many personalities in Assam and elsewhere in the Northeast following such co-option is a phenomenon very few are unaware of. Significantly, however, very little official documentation of the phenomenon has taken place, although anecdotal evidence abounds. Field interviews, for instance, have revealed how prominent Axamiyā journalist and human-rights crusader Parag Kumar Das was murdered in broad daylight in 1996 because of his reluctance to get co-opted in this manner. Some of his peers, on the other hand, who had also once raised their voices against the State but have subsequently sacrificed their anti-State rhetoric, have been suitably rewarded by the establishment. The inability to name specific individuals here and conduct detailed case studies of the phenomenon

vis-à-vis these individuals will remain one of the major constraints of a social scientist working in the Northeast region.

Interviews with senior journalists, academics and the police and administrative officers of Assam and elsewhere in the Northeast have revealed how there are many who also act as double agents for the State and the insurgents. According to these interviewees, there are also many academics who function as mouthpieces of the various insurgent factions, consequently sacrificing the objectivity of social research.

Such challenges to intellectual integrity apart, in a region where the security forces are given immunity under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act 1958 (AFSPA) and are known to have indulged with impunity in offenses ranging from extra-judicial killings to rape to petty crimes against civilians, individual safety is always at risk.

Concepts and Categories in Conflict

Under the circumstances, then, one has to be extremely alert to the nuances of the conflicts being studied. To directly attribute most ethnic conflicts and cases of ethnic violence to inter-ethnic animosities and competitions can often leave the story only half told, or worse still, incorrectly told. In order to avoid this, the researcher must therefore be extremely well-versed in the intricacies of the prevalent political climate, and avoid taking anything at face value. In the absence of such a consciousness, it is possible that errors might be made in conceptualising or theorising one's research thesis itself.

There is always the danger of confounding categories and losing objectivity, even in the early stages of conceptualising one's research and the approach to one's subject of research. In particular, one needs to walk the intellectual tightrope while applying labels and categorising communities, something that cannot be done indiscriminately given the frequently shifting political equations. For instance, the dominant Axamiyā community has been accused of a neo-colonial attitude in its approach to the other communities. Indeed, countering Axamiyā hegemony has been the driving force behind many of the political and insurgent movements in Assam, the Bodo Movement being one of them. And yet, there are those who would apply the labels of 'ethnic' and 'indigenous' to the community. Thus, when the AASU, which had also given leadership to the Assam Movement,

formed the Asom Sena (Assam Army), it declared its aim to be to 'safeguard the socio-political rights of the indigenous people of Assam' (Thakuria 2006), referring, of course, to the Axamiyā people as a whole. Established scholarship, on the other hand, gives us quite a different definition of these categories.

It is true that in the field of indigenous studies, there is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes indigeness, and 'self-identification' has been accepted as the internationally accepted marker of the same: 'only indigenous peoples could define indigenous peoples' (Cornassel 2008: 51). United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur Jose Martinez Cobo's conceptualisation of an indigenous community, however, is considered 'the usual reference point for any discussion of "indigeneity"' (Geiger 2008: 184). Cobo identifies 'indigenous' people as

those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories or parts of them. They form at present nondominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity, the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems. (Cobo 1986: Add 4, paragraph 379)

If non-dominance be one of the criteria, then the Axamiyā community has no claim to a self-identification as 'indigenous'. However, Ted Gurr (2000) has subsequently drawn a distinction between indigenous peoples proper and 'ethnonationalists'. For him, indigenous peoples are 'conquered descendants of earlier inhabitants of a region who live mainly in conformity with traditional social, economic, and cultural customs that are sharply distinct from those of the dominant groups' (ibid.: 17). 'Ethnonationalists', on the other hand, are 'indigenous peoples who had durable states of their own prior to conquest, such as Tibetans, or who have given sustained support to modern movements aimed at establishing their own state, such as the Kurds' (ibid.). According to this definition, then, the Axamiyā, with their Ahom kingdom of yore, cannot be categorised as indigenous. In the same way, even the Bodos, who are widely accepted as an 'indigenous' community of Assam but trace their history to the mighty Kachari kingdom, should not be considered as such. Therefore, to avoid such

confusions in applying labels and assigning categories, I have confined myself to using the closely allied but better-defined concepts of 'ethnicity' and 'nationalism' in the study of the communities under consideration.

Another related problem in conceptualising the communities of Assam is the process of the 'retribalisation' of the 'detrified' communities. For instance, anybody researching the Koch community will be faced with the dilemma of whether to label them as tribal or non-tribal. This is a community that grew out of its 'tribal' roots and in the due course of history assimilated into the Ahamiyā fold, with an overwhelming majority of them even adopting Ahamiyā caste names. Recent years, however, have seen a resurgence of Koch identity politics, and the community is involved in reversing the process of assimilation while demanding the status of a 'Scheduled Tribe' in the Indian constitution. So does one use labels like 'ethnic', 'tribal' or 'indigenous' for the community? In the course of fieldwork, I have seen that the Koches of western BTAD are less assimilated into the dominant community than those of the east. The latter are also thus less assertive in their demands. Indeed, western Assam is where the new resurgent Koch community leaders have envisaged setting up the state of Kamatapur, reminiscent of the Koch kingdom of medieval history.

However, as previously mentioned, the main problem with the cartography of the proposed state of Kamatapur is that it overlaps with the boundary of the current BTAD, as well as the proposed sovereign State of Boroland as demanded by the NDFB. Although the friction between the Koch and the Bodo communities is yet to acquire the status of large-scale manifest violence, the animosity is evident. And it leaves the researcher with another important challenge – that of engaging with such changing self-definitions and overlapping histories and conflicting political demands. It is essential that the researcher/scholar should have an extremely fine and subtle understanding of the temporal and spatial variations in such self-definitions and demands. It is nothing but the lack of a similarly nuanced understanding among political activists and community leaders that led to the conflagration of ethnic conflicts in Assam. To avoid falling into the same trap, it is therefore important for anybody studying the multitude of conflicts thus far discussed to first address the conflicts within, that is to say, the conflicts in her own understanding, before embarking on a study of the conflicts without.

NOTES

1. The communities include Ahom, Aiton, Assamese–Brahman, Assamese–Muslim, Assamese–Sikh, Bangali (Hindu), Bangali (Muslim), Bania, Baishaya, Baroi, Basphor, Bauri, Bhangi, Bhumij, Bhuyan, Bihari, Bilaspuri, Bishnupriya, Chakma, Chutiya, Deori, Dhoba, Dowaniya, Ganak, Garo, Goala, Gond, Gop, Halam, Hari, Hajjam, Hajong, Hira, Hmar, Jaintia, JalKeot, Jhalo-malo, Jolha, Kachari-Barman, Kachari-Boro, Kachari-Dimasa, Kachari-Hojai, Kachari-Madahi, Kachari-Mech, Kachari-Sonowal, Kaibarta, Kalita, Karbi, Karmakar, Kayastha, Keot, Khamti, Khamyang, Kharia, Khasi Bhoi, Khasi Lyngum, Kherwar, Koya, Kshattriya, Kuki, Kumar, Kurmi, Lalung, Madrasi, Mali, Manipuri/Meitei, Man/Mann, Maria Muslim, Marwari, Matak, Mishng, Moran, Mukhi, Munda, Mushahar, Naga-Kabui, Naga-Konyak, Naga-Rengma, Naga-Sema, Naga-Zemei, Namosudra, Napit, Nath, Nayak, Nepali, Nocte, Oraon, Pan, Panan, Patni, Porjah, Punjabi, Rabha, Rajbanshi, Rajput, Rangidhoba, Ravidas, Rieng, Rudrapal, Saloi, Santal, Saraniya, Shudradas, Sut, Sutradhar, Singpho, Tai Phake, Tanti, Tantubay, Telenga, Teli, Thengal, Tripura, and Turung.
2. In doing so, I have taken what Jack S. Levy (2009: 73) calls an ‘atheoretical/idiographic’ approach. Levy defines this approach as a descriptive study of an individual case that aims to interpret and understand the case as an end in itself rather than develop broader theoretical generalisations. ‘The study’, he says, ‘may be guided by implicit theoretical preconceptions – as in fact all empirical studies are to one extent or another’ but ‘the facts “speak for themselves”, so that the interpretation emerges in a “bottom up” fashion from the case’.
3. The tribes of Assam are divided into hills tribes and plains tribes to distinguish them on the basis of their traditional habitat. Since the 16th century, the term tribe has referred to groups/communities which live in primitive and barbarous conditions of living (Xaxa 2005). This definition has been viewed with suspicion as being a colonial construct, and has thus come under much attack (Beteille 1995; K. S. Singh 1993). Wherever not qualified with quotes, this book will stick to the definition of a tribe as an ‘administrative and political concept in India’. This definition has been endorsed by the AnSI in its report ‘The Scheduled Tribes’ (AnSI 1994).
4. Article 342 (1) of the Indian constitution states that: ‘The President may with respect to any State or Union territory, and where it is a State, after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State or Union territory, as the case may be’.

5. No census was conducted in Assam in 1981 due to the volatile political situation created by the Assam Movement.
6. Though sociologists around the world continue to disagree on the value of history, the two disciplines have been drawing closer to each other since the 1950s (Goldthorpe 1986 [1972], Lipset 1968). As Charles Tilly puts it:

Historical social criticism reconstructs the past on the way to informing human choices in the present and future. It rests on the plausible assumptions that history contains a record of human successes and failures in dealing with problems persisting into the present; that if long-term trends exist, their causes are likely to continue; and that recent history limits what will happen next. (2001: 6753)

7. Hammerseley and Atkinson have defined ethnography as involving:

... [T]he ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (1995 [1983]: 1)

As a research method that 'cannot be programmed' (ibid [1983]:23), ethnography was best suited for my work in the conflict zone of my choosing where one had to be prepared for the sudden and the unexpected at all times.

8. 'Sponsors and gatekeepers' are the people who have 'the power to open up or block off access or who consider themselves and are considered by others to have the authority to grant or refuse access' (ibid: 64).
9. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights defines internally displaced persons (IDPs) as:

'Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border' (United Nations Commission on Human Rights 1998).

Two

What is Axamiyā?

Understanding an Interethnic Identity



In an account of his adventures in Burma, Thailand and China, after he embarked on the journey in 1933, trader and traveller Purna Kanta Buragohain (1993) recounts his stay in what he calls ‘Axamiyā villages’ in Burma. The people of these villages had retained Axamiyā culture, preserved Axamiyā texts (even if most of them could not speak the language) and observed Axamiyā festivals and rituals. Some of these villages dated back to the days of cordial relations between the Tai-Ahom and the Burmese kings, when Ahom women were offered in marriage and sent to Burma with gifts. Some dated back to the days of the Burmese occupation of Assam in the early 19th century, when many were taken prisoners to Burma and ‘Axamiyā’ villages came up there. Other villages had been more recently established by Axamiyā people in the British army, who preferred to stay back. There were also traders, other administrative officials and Buddhist monks in Burma who had come there from Assam.

In one particular ‘Axamiyā’ village, Buragohain (1993: 115–17) recounts his meeting with Malati *burhi* (old woman), who was 79 years old. Her mother had come to Burma following the Burmese invasion of Assam (1817–26). And despite the passage of decades, Malati *burhi* spoke and understood the Axamiyā language. She considered herself to be Axamiyā and practised Axamiyā Xankari (neo-Vaishnavite) customs. The writer was moved by Malati *burhi*’s tears as she expressed her deep yearning for all things Axamiyā. The people of the other Axamiyā villages nearby looked up to her with respect, and although they themselves sang Axamiyā devotional songs, they could not otherwise speak or understand the language. The writer exclaims at one point, ‘Hail, Mother Assam! A century has passed by, but your children have not forgotten you’ (my translation, *ibid.*: 116).

The passage describing Buragohain's meeting with Malati *burhi* inspires some amount of reflection on the nature of the Axamiyā identity, and indeed on the nature of social identity as a whole, of which ethnic and national identities are types. In these villages, Buragohain saw that certain elements of religion and culture had been preserved, but the language had mostly been forgotten. The influence of Xankari religion and culture among the people of these 'Axamiyā villages' was so strong that they equated knowledge and practice of the same with the Axamiyā identity. Is the Axamiyā identity then all about religion? The Xankari religion is only one among the many strains of Hinduism prevalent in Assam, albeit one that has shaped much of Axamiyā culture and traditions and influenced almost all the diverse communities (indigenous and non-indigenous) of the state. But despite its strong influence, can we equate Axamiyā-ness with the Xankari – or even at a stretch, the Hindu – religion and way of life?

At the same time, for the people of these villages in Burma, who were mostly originally from the Ahom community, the Tai-Ahom culture and language were also equally important aspects of their Axamiyā heritage as they remembered it. Thus, when Buragohain tells her that most of the Ahoms in Assam have now forgotten the Tai language and customs, Malati *burhi* is upset. The Tai-Ahom community, and its language and culture, has played an extremely important role in the Axamiyā identity formation. So what part of the identity of the 'Axamiyā' villagers in Burma is Tai-Ahom and what part Axamiyā? Are the two identities mutually exclusive? What is the basis of the self-definition of these villagers as Axamiyā?

Other such interesting questions about identity are also raised by the narration in the same passage of Buragohain's account. For instance, Malati *burhi* recounts the visit of two 'Kachari' soldiers from Goalpara in western Assam to their village. She says she was not convinced that these soldiers from Goalpara were Axamiyā given that they were not familiar with the Axamiyā language or with Xankari traditions. The many questions that can be asked at this point are: If certain communities continued speaking their native languages and practising their indigenous religions, or at least retained traits of their indigenous religions despite converting to Hinduism (as many indigenous communities of Assam, including the Bodo-Kacharis, have), would they be considered Axamiyā? What role does geography and history play in determining the nature of Axamiyā identity?

AXAMIYĀ IDENTITY, THE BASES

The questions thrown up by the above-cited passage call for an enquiry into the nature of the social/collective identity of the Axamiyā. Social scientists tell us that identities may be succinctly defined as ‘self-referential cultural narratives and integral moments of self’ that are ‘articulated in the routine presentations and performances that embodied subjects enact in the quotidian’ (Langman 2003: 223). Specifically, social identity has been defined by social-identity theorist Tajfel as ‘that part of the self-concept of the individual that derives from his knowledge about his membership in a social group(s), and from the value and the emotional meaning that accompany this membership’ (1981: 255). Collective identity then refers to the joint or ‘collective’ awareness and recognition that members of a group share the same social identity (Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe 2004; Klandermans and de Weerd 2000; Mellucci 1989; Simon and Klandermans 2001). A nation and an ethnic group are both entities that embody distinctive social/collective identities. What, however, are the common factors shared by a collective – what indeed are the ‘self-referential cultural narratives’ (Langman 2003: 223) and what constitute the ‘integral moments of self’ (ibid.) of a collective – that makes it consider itself an ‘ingroup’ while considering those that do not belong within its ambit as ‘outgroups’?¹ It is important to identify these factors as they could indicate the bases of ingroup bias and outgroup derogation that lead ultimately to inter-group conflicts. Ethnic conflicts being the subject matter of this book, it is essential that it begins by identifying those factors that have led over time to the formation of ethnic identities in Assam. The subsequent sections will discuss the factors that contributed to the formation of the Axamiyā identity.

The Place

Most of the earliest available written accounts of Assam equate it with the Ahom kingdom. These include the written accounts left behind by Ahom historiographers in the form of *Buranjis*² which chronicle the nearly six centuries of Ahom rule over Assam. ‘The narratives of Muhammadan writers, wherever these are available for comparison’, (Gait 2001 [1905]: vii) also do the same. The ‘Asham’ mentioned in the *Ain-i-Akbari* and the ‘Asam’ referred to in the *Padshahnamah* (Barpujari 2004a: 1) refer to the Ahom kingdom. Surmised to

have been known as Kamrup or Pragjyotishpur in antiquity, the Brahmaputra valley came to be associated with the name Assam (or its approximate) only after the Ahoms started migrating in hordes from across the Patkai mountains and settling here. Indeed, most of the theories relating to the origin of the name 'Assam' refer to the Ahoms in one way or another. Some scholars draw upon both the Tai origins of the Ahoms and the later Hindu/Aryan influences upon the community to establish that the word 'Assam' is a derivative of the word 'Ahom'. Satyendranath Sarma, for instance, reasons that in the Tai language, *cham* means 'to defeat or vanquish and when preceded by the negative particle it becomes *acham* and by vowel harmony it became *acham*, *acam* and finally *asama*' (1989: 2). He goes on to elaborate:

Because of their superior physique and power, the Tai conquerors were called *Ācām* or unconquerable and undefeated. Gradually, when the Āhoms (Tais) became the master of the entire Brahmaputra Valley, the epithet was transferred to the region over which they ruled. Thus, the name Kāmarūpa was replaced by *Acham* which again in the course of time became *Āsam* and finally [a Sanskrit derivative] *Asam* (unequal, unparallel). (Ibid.)

One may or may not subscribe to any or all of these theories regarding the origins of the word, but it is beyond doubt that the Axamiyā identity would not have been formed the way it did without the immense influence that the Ahoms had over the land and its people. They also united the land for the first time in recorded history – I shall not go into the reconstructions of pre-historic and mythological kingdoms here. The Ahom rulers, at various points of time and to various degrees, began subjugating the smaller kingdoms of the many autochthonous communities, including the Chutiyas, the Borahis, the Morans, and the Kacharis. These communities had already made the hills and valleys of Assam their homeland before the advent of the Ahoms. But as the political influence of the Ahoms grew, many of them submerged even their social identity with that of the ruling community: the Ahom–Chutiya identity that grew out of the close interactions and marriage relations between the Ahoms and the Chutiyas is a case in point (Gait 2001 [1905]: 41).

When they first came in contact with the region, the British colonisers, whose empire even a century after their conquest of the rest of India extended only up to Bengal, also often equated Assam

with the Ahom kingdom. Being a region that was 'entirely unknown and inaccessible to Europeans and scarcely ever visited even by the subjects of Bengal' (Wade 1972 [1800]: i), very little was known about it till 1792 when a British military detachment was sent to Assam under Captain Thomas Welsh to crush a rebellion at the request of the then Ahom king Gaurinath Singha. The commercial treaty that was drawn up with the ruler following the military help offered by the British, paved the way for more outsiders to come into Assam. Dr John Peter Wade's *An Account of Assam*, written in 1800, is perhaps one of the earliest by a European.³ He was the medical officer of the military detachment that came to Assam with Captain Welsh. In his account, Wade starts with a description of the Ahom kingdom and polity under the heading of 'An Account of Assam' but goes on to also incorporate information on the Kachari and Jayantia kingdoms, Kamrup, and the Koch kingdom besides. For indeed, close on the heels of the ascendancy of the Ahom dynasty in what is now known as Upper or eastern Assam, the influence of the Koch kingdom was also on the rise in Lower or western Assam and its neighbouring areas, including north and east Bengal. The changing contours of these two kingdoms through annexation and expansion at various points in history often resulted in overlapping areas of influence. The ancient kingdom of Kamrup, which was by now reduced to a region encompassing western and central Assam, was mostly ruled by a few 'lesser rajahs' or petty chieftains. It also functioned as a buffer between the larger monarchies. It was initially occupied by the Koch kings, but at different times in history, came under Ahom rule as well. At other times, it was also under the rule of Muslim invaders (S. Sarma 1989). The Kachari kingdom, which at the height of its glory spread over much of southern Assam, was another mighty kingdom that resisted Ahom domination for a long time, but was ultimately subdued (Gait 2001 [1905]; S. Sarma 1989).

Thus, there were many diverse spheres of political influence still alive when the colonisers first came in contact with the land. But since the Ahom influence was predominant, 'Axamiyā' came to be equated with 'Ahom', and 'Assam' with the Ahom kingdom. At the time when Wade wrote his account,

the kingdom of Assam is about seven hundred miles in length, and from sixty to eighty in breadth . . . it will be within a very moderate

calculation to consider the surface as containing sixty thousand square miles; an extent much superior to that of England . . . From this computation of square miles are excluded all the dependencies and conquered countries, in or beyond the mountainous limits which surrounded Assam in every direction, as well as several provinces of Eastern Bengal, which formerly acknowledged their subjection to the Assam government. (1972 [1800]: 340)

Nearly a century after Wade's account, Gunabhiram Barua⁴ delineated the administrative extent of Assam under the British, who had wrested control of the region in 1826, as follows:

Its [Assam's] total area is 17044 if we exclude the hills . . . The country lies in the north eastern corner of India. There is no British territory to the east of its borders. In length it is almost 500 miles and in breadth, although not equally in all the areas, a total of 60 miles. (My translation, 1972 [1884]: 1)

The administrative boundaries of Assam outlined by Wade and Barua were, however, qualified by references to earlier geographies redrawn from the memories of past glory. Wade, for instance, recounts from the Ahom histories he was given access to that

the Kingdom of Assam was at an earlier period flourishing and powerful . . . the kingdom of Bootan and Nepal were subdued by the Monarchs of Assam, who extended their conquests to the banks of the Ganges by the capture of Gour and . . . Tipera [Tripura], Coosbeyhar and the countries to the east of the Corotia river formed a part of their dominions. (1972 [1800]: iv)

Barua also goes back to the mythological past and draws upon inadequate historical evidence to delineate a past Assam, known by various nomenclatures that extended much beyond the current territory:

The name 'Assam' given to the land of Assam is modern. It did not have this name in yore. And the territorial limits that have now been fixed were also not the limits in early times. *Mahabharata*, *Kalika Puran*, *Bhagavat*, *Yogini Tantra* and other texts mention this land. But the name 'Assam' does not appear in them. If we look at the Purans and the other texts, we get to learn that major portions of the early Kamrup, Sonitpur, Hidamba, Manipur and Kaundilya countries have now come to be known as Assam . . . as the strengths of the countries

like Sonitpur, Hidamba, Kaundilya began to wane the king of Kamrup began to spread his reign to their territories . . . Within the territorial limits of this Kamrup, Rangpur, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri were also included. On the other side a bit of Mymensingh district and a bit of Srihatta [Sylhet] also were included. (My translation, G. Barua 1972 [1884]: 5–6)

In the 19th century, for upcoming Axamiyā intellectuals like Gunabhiram Barua, recalling and/or recreating a glorious past were a means of reclaiming a national pride that was being threatened by the preference given to Bengali people in matters of employment by the colonial administration. The Bengali language was also being promoted for official use by a section of the administrators, while Axamiyā was being touted as a mere dialect of Bengali. The educated Axamiyā elite and middle class, therefore, did not spare any effort in trying to establish Axamiyā as a sub-nation of the great Indian nation – at par, and not inferior to Bengal – and to this end, drew upon ancient Indian, especially Hindu, mythology to establish ties with the mainland. There were quite a few significant implications of this process on the newly shaped Axamiyā national character. Primarily, though, it was a means adopted by the intelligentsia to ignite national pride and inspire an emotional attachment to the idea of Assam as a part of the great Indian nation.

This trend of emotionalising geography⁵ to recreate past history did not, however, end with the colonial withdrawal and the inclusion of Assam within independent India. In the course of time, this emotional geography took the shape of ‘Bar Axam’ or ‘Greater Assam’:

The land stretching from the Karatoya up to Sadiya, over which at one point in history flew the flag of king Bhagadatta, which incorporated within itself areas such as the present Assam valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Cooch Behar, the northeastern parts of Mymensingh, ‘Bar Axam’ refers to that land. (My translation, Bhuyan 2008: 57)

One of the foremost Axamiyā historians, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, identifies the 12th century as the breaking point of the Bar Axam of yore, when the mighty kingdom of Kamrup splintered and numerous petty kingdoms rose in its place. He goes on to describe how the Ahom monarchs tried to bring the great land together but failed. The idea of Bar Axam, however, has lived on. In the aftermath of the

Partition, the Indian independence from British rule and the yoking of Assam and the Northeast to the rest of India, it has shrunk to include most of those areas that remained part of what came to be known as Northeast India, the claims over most of the Bengali-dominated areas (like Mymensingh and Sylhet, currently in Bangladesh) having been abandoned. The Naga, Mizo, Khasi, and Jaintia Hills as well as the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) remained parts of Assam after 1947 and 'Greater Assam' incorporated the peoples and cultures of these hills as well. But soon after, each of these constituent units began to be successively dissociated from the administrative bounds of Assam, shrinking Bar Axam even further.

Speaking about the Indian nation-building process, Partha Chatterjee has pointed out: 'In the days when the nation was being produced imaginatively without the actual shape of a state, many possibilities of communities that colonial knowledge would have declared as radically distinct came together into large political solidarities' (1994: 225).

The Assamese intelligentsia, 'enlightened' by Western education and inspired by the modern ideals of renaissance, nationhood, liberty, and equality, which had fired the Indian nationalist movement in neighbouring Bengal, also began to devote attention to shaping a modern Axamiyā nationality. In doing this, it relied heavily upon the cartography of Bar Axam, which would encompass the many diverse communities of the Northeast under the rubric of the Axamiyā nation.

But it was seen in the pan-Indian scenario that immediately after state-formation, various fragments of the nation surfaced – a centre was created and as a corollary, the peripheries of power; the 'mainstream' of political power was now readily distinguished from the marginal; and dominant and minority populations also became identifiable. Similarly, in the case of Assam, the emotional appeal of Bar Axam proved inadequate when it came to politically appeasing all the constituent communities. As the subsequent sections will corroborate, in the scramble for political control under the 'post'-colonial dispensation, the ideology of Bar Axam became one of the root causes of ethnic fragmentation in Assam, used by the dominant few to retain control while the marginalised others began to identify it as a tool for 'internal colonisation'.⁶

The People

Migration/Population Movement

The diversity of the ethnic mosaic of Assam had been emerging for centuries before the British, or even the Ahoms, conquered the land. Assam, and the whole of the Northeast in fact, has been likened to both a 'flowergarden' and a 'fluid corridor' (Bhaumik 2003). It has for centuries been the gateway or buffer between the two distinct regions of the Asian continent now divided in area studies as South Asia and Southeast Asia. Population movement between the two areas has been through what is now Northeast India, along two major routes: 'the Assam-Burma routes in the east, one that runs through Cachar-Manipur helped the migration of the racial elements from South-East Asia' and the other, 'the Patkai route . . . followed by the Ahoms and other Tibeto-Burmans from the north-east'. Over and above these were 'the hill passes of Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal . . . probably used by certain waves of the Tibeto-Burmans'. On the west were, of course, 'the valleys of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, through which the Aryans penetrated into Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa' (Barpujari 2004a: 2-3).

Being thus located at 'one of the great migration routes of mankind', Assam and the Northeast saw diverse racial elements pass through it, peoples and communities which 'not only left their cultural remnants but contributed to the ethnic composition of the people' (ibid.: 3). Thus, this fluid corridor also became a 'flowergarden', resplendent with a rare ethnic diversity. Such population movements continued even into the medieval and early modern periods. As David Ludden has outlined:

The major mobile forces that shaped Assam decisively in early modern times, *circa* 1660-1830, came from the east, west, north and south: (i) the Mughals and British moved northeast from Bengal; (ii) the Ahoms moved down the Brahmaputra valley; (iii) Burmese armies moved around the Patkai and across the Nagaland ranges; (iv) and trans-Himalayan forces came south from Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, and China. In the long view of history, Assam was shaped by human mobility moving in all directions. (2003: 10)

The commerce of goods, peoples and cultures between Burma and the Ahom kingdom is well documented. In fact, according to Gait, the Burmese kings referred to the Ahom rulers as their

‘brother kings’ (2001 [1905]: 76). Trade with China, Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan was also carried out ‘from at least the early 1600s’ (Blackburn 2003–04: 33) through trans-Himalayan routes in the Duar areas, mainly through annual trade-fairs that were set up by the Ahom rulers. To these fairs came traders from Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, and India. The late 18th century saw much political turmoil in the Ahom kingdom, and in the early 19th century the Burmese invasion of Assam occurred. As a result, these fairs were discontinued temporarily, only to be revived by the British in the 1820s (ibid.). By the early 20th century, however, this state-regulated trade was taken over by ‘individual traders, mostly Marwaris and later British entrepreneurs’, who were the new and ‘increasingly professionalised capitalists’ (ibid.).

In the meantime, the Indian frontier policies of the British administration had been shaping Assam and the Northeast, in matters other than trade, into the last limits of the British Empire. Writing in 1884, Susan Ward notes how Assam in the popular perception:

has been facetiously termed ‘the happy valley’, ‘the last end of creation’, the ‘jumping off place’; the latter may seem applicable from the fact that the regions around – north, east, and south – Bhutan, Chinese Tartary, the Shan country, and the north of Burmah, are virtually unknown regions. (1884: 3)

Thus, despite early commerce and population movement since the ancient times, to the Indian subjects of the British Empire, Assam and the Northeast began to appear like a faraway land, to be newly discovered, newly peopled and explored for avenues of trade, agriculture and so on. This was also the beginning of the formation of the region into what modern social and political scientists call a ‘frontier’ and define as an area of indigenous inhabitation affected by administrative extension and exploitation by colonial expansionism (Turner 1893; Bodley 1975; Thompson and Lamar 1981). This process was no doubt started by the British but it was also continued in the same vein by the ‘post’-colonial Indian State.

Religion

One of the major characteristics of the ‘frontierisation’ of an area is that ‘state and private agents define indigenous inhabitants as standing outside the moral universe by symbolically associating them with “untamed nature”’ (Geiger 2002). In frontierising Assam, therefore,

colonial literature – including travelogues, ethnographies, etc. – referred to ‘the laxity of morals amongst the people’ and observed how ‘in religion, the Assamese affect Hindooism, but . . . are lax in the observance of religious rites’ (Cooper 1873: 101). Later, Axamiyā scholars, of course, interpreted such ‘laxity’ as tolerance, claiming that this tolerance was the result of the ‘gradual fusion’ of the various strains of ‘Animism, Tantricism, Hinduism, Vaishnavism’ that have ‘contributed to the development of the present religious system in Assam’ (Doley 1991 [1980]: 30).

The fact that Hinduism is the majority religion in mainland India, no doubt, influenced the British to only consider the Hindus as the representative Axamiyā. Besides, their first interactions being with the Ahoms, who had by then converted to Hinduism, and finding that the other great powers, like the Koch and the Kachari rulers, had also adopted the same religion, Axamiyā identity came to be equated with the Hindu identity. The main source of information about Assam for the outside world (read Bengal and beyond) were, initially, the Bengali Brahmins ‘of Santipoor, Nuddea and other Western districts’ who were instrumental in converting the Ahom king and his subjects to Hinduism (Wade 1972 [1800]: iii). Subsequently, it was the Hindu Axamiyā elite who travelled to Calcutta or other parts of British India for Western higher education and claimed descent from Brahmin families in Kanauj and other places of mainland India. Hinduism thus became associated with the Axamiyā identity, an association never subsequently contested by the pioneers of the Axamiyā nation-building exercise in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It has been surmised that the history of Hinduism in Assam is as old as the history of Aryan migration to the land (S. Sarma 1989: 188). However, despite various Hindu dynasties ruling over the land, till the beginning of the 13th century, non-Aryan/indigenous religions continued to be practised by a majority of the population (*ibid.*). Both Aryan and non-Aryan faiths, for instance, fused together in the worship of Siva, a powerful Hindu god whose nature and origin seems to be more non-Aryan than that of most others, barring the mother goddess or Shakti element in the Hindu religion. Certainly, Siva had a strong following among the indigenous peoples of Assam – the Bodos, for instance, have worshipped him in his crazed form as ‘Phagla Baba’ or as ‘Shibrai’. As Hinduism gained ground in Assam, some modes of worshipping Siva – ‘associated with wine and flesh’ – managed

to attract the disdain of the Aryanised sections of society (B. Kakati 1989: 16). To counter these practices and

to secure easy recognition by aboriginal people they (the Hinduised Aryans) brought to prominence another local cult – the cult of the Mother Goddess . . . This mother cult of Kamakhya must have belonged to certain matriarchal [*śiṛ*] tribes like the Khasis and the Garos. To win over their allegiance and support and facilitate the propagation of Aryan ideas and customs, royal patronage was extended to this local cult of Kamakhya. (Ibid.)

The various forms of Hinduism that gained ground in Assam could, therefore, not thrive without reference to or the adoption of elements from the non-Aryan/indigenous religions. It has, of course, been in the nature of Hinduism to be malleable in its efforts to legitimise the spread of the Indic civilisation – and thereby serve various political and mercantile interests. Many scholars have noted how the deities and *rishis* (holy men; saints) of Hinduism are shown conquering non-Aryan peoples, taking over their land for cultivation, even converting ‘tribal’ leaders into Kshatriyas (people belonging to the warrior caste among Hindus). This also afforded the rulers and chiefly class among the ‘tribal’ communities an opportunity to unify their polities ‘guided by Indic political and religious ideologies, as well as theories of divinely-sanctioned conquest’ (Lewis 1994: 28). The conquering Kachari, Ahom and Koch rulers of Assam also thus adopted and/or patronised Hinduism at various points of time, in its various forms, be it Shaivism, Shaktism or the later Vaishnavism.

Of all the various forms of Hinduism prevalent in Assam, Vaishnavism or the Xankari religion propounded by Xankardeb was perhaps the most instrumental in bringing the various ethnic communities of Assam closer together. A simplified form of Hinduism that shunned the rigorous institutionalisation, ostentation and orthodoxy that had crept into the religion,⁷ Xankardeb’s neo-Vaishnavism in Assam was known as the *Ek Xaran Nam Dharma* or ‘the religion of Supreme surrender to One’, the ‘One’ here being Vishnu (B. Kakati 1989: 72). The unique – and depending on one’s point of view, one may call it either lax or liberal – form that Hinduism had taken in Assam can be gauged from the fact that Xankardeb, who belonged to the Sudra caste (the fourth rung of the Hindu caste system) and was a Kayastha (a Hindu community, traditionally record-keepers and administrators), counted many prominent Brahmin scholars among

the ranks of his disciples. What is more, he did not disallow *xaran*, or refuge, into his faith to persons of any religion or community. Thus, among his most faithful followers was also a Muslim named Chand Sai (Chand Shah) (Taher 1991 [1980]: 40).

Like most of the earlier forms of Hinduism prevalent in Assam, the Xankari religion also allowed easy membership to individuals of the non-Aryan/indigenous communities. These communities viewed embracing the Xankari religion as a means of elevating their status in a society that was being increasingly Hinduised under royal patronage and the growing might of the Brahmins, and where their religions were being denigrated and frowned upon by orthodox Hinduism for practices such as meat-eating and alcohol consumption. What is more, in many cases, adoption of the Xankari religion translated not just into religious conversion, but also racial. The Koch community, for instance, emerged from their origins from within the Bodo group of communities, and took on the nomenclature and nature of a separate community through conversion to Hinduism.⁸ Due to the easy acceptance granted by the Xankari form of Hinduism, then, 'detrribalisation' became rampant from the 14th and 15th centuries onwards. There were also other communities like the Xaraniya Kacharis, which were constituted following their conversion to Hinduism under the influence of the Xankari religion. However, certain communities like the Modahis that had converted to Hinduism were not accepted unconditionally into the Hindu fold because of their inability to give up alcohol altogether.

Indeed, it is true that even when entirely accepted, no amount of detrribalisation could elevate the non-Aryan/indigenous communities beyond a certain status or caste within the Hindu universe of Assam, increasingly Brahminical as it had become. But what needs to be recognised in response to such Brahminical attitudes is that, as the discussion above shows, Hinduism in this part of the world – the 'great tradition' as conceived by Robert Redfield (1956: 27) – would not have survived had it not adopted many of the beliefs and customs of the non-Aryan/indigenous religions – or Redfield's 'little traditions' (ibid.).⁹ Hinduism in Assam owes its existence to many non-Aryan religions, elements of which were incorporated through a process of 'universalisation'. Based on Redfield's categorisation, Mckim Marriott (1955) in his study of little communities in 'village India' developed his theory of a two-way interaction – resulting in 'universalization' and 'parochialization' – between the great and the

little traditions. According to Marriott, ‘parochialization’ is the process by which some element of the great tradition is learned and then shaped to become part of local religious practice (Redfield 1956: 96). ‘Universalization’, on the other hand, is the process by which a local tradition is transformed into a great tradition or part of a great tradition (ibid.: 94–96). Through a process of ‘universalisation’, then, certain non-Aryan practices and sub-cults exist even today within the ambit of the so-called orthodox Hindu sects. The Bamasari, or left-handed, rituals practised in the worship of Siva, the Hindu god of destruction, and the supreme Hindu goddess Shakti, whose most potent manifestation in Assam is in the form of the mother goddess Kamakhya, indicate incorporation of indigenous elements and rituals that seem to have been practised by ‘both the aboriginal and the Aryanised people’ (B. Kakati 1989: 19). Secret cults like the Rati Khowa or Purnadharia that have survived in certain pockets also profess Hinduism, but include alcohol, meat and sex in their rituals. They refer to certain ancient Hindu texts like the *Kalika Puran* in order to override injunctions against these rituals in orthodox Hinduism. This *puran* (ancient Hindu text eulogising a particular deity), ‘in its choice and treatment of ancient myths and legends and in the invention of new ones has given something like canonical sanction to all kinds of sexual aberrations’ among other elements of Purnadharia rituals (ibid.: 48). The influence of tantric Buddhism, over and above that of non-Aryan/indigenous religions, on the origins of these cults, as well as on the worship of certain manifestations of the mother goddess in Assam, such as Tamreswari, Ekajata and Ugratara, has also been a subject of study by many scholars (cf. N. Bordoloi 2004; B. Kakati 1989). But this only indicates that Hinduism in Assam has never had any claims to being the only religion practised by its people; the Buddhist tradition has also left a lasting impact.

Language

Nevertheless, not many traces of the Buddhist tradition – other than scattered archaeological and arcane religious evidence – are overtly noticeable in Assam anymore. Certain intrinsic and underlying influences of the Buddhist element, though, have been found in various studies on the development of the Axamiyā identity. Particularly in the formation of the language and literature of Assam, Buddhism seems to have had a fundamental influence. For instance, the *Sarjyāpads*,

or mystic songs of Buddhist *Siddhāchāryas* (holy men) of Kamrup in Assam, dating back to the period between the 8th and 12th centuries AD, have been surmised to be the earliest compositions in Axamiyā literature (S. Sarma 1989: 177).

Subsequently, Xankardeb's contributions in the 15th and 16th centuries AD provided a major impetus to the development of the language and its literature in multiple forms. A multifarious personality, Xankardeb has, in fact, been called the Leonardo da Vinci of Assam (Rabha 2008: 940):

He has given the Axamiyā everything. The Axamiyās' songs, instruments, dances, rhythm and lilt, literature, *bhāona* (stylised one-act plays), *nām-kirtan* (prayer), *ghoxā* (verses), *bargit* (hymns), *anka* (acts), dramas, *nāmghar* (prayer halls), *khol*, *mridang*, *tāl* (musical instruments), *bhājghar* (store), *dauljātrā* (a festival), *hāti* (a particular design of housing), banking, society, religion, judiciary, customs, laws, moral upheaval, [the ideas of] non-violence, sacrifice, hedonism, detachment, renunciation etcetera – everything has been given to the Axamiyā by Xankardeb. (My translation, *ibid.*: 940–41)

Indeed, Xankardeb and the Xankari way of life that he initiated (and which his disciples later institutionalised) has given Axamiyā life and culture much of its basic values and underlying philosophy, a lot of which is also embedded in the language that they helped shape and enrich. The synergistic nature of the Axamiyā identity – which the preceding section has demonstrated in the matter of religion and religious influences – is also evident in the language as developed by Xankardeb and those who followed in his tradition. In outlining the philosophy of the Axamiyā language, Anil Raichoudhury (1998) has demonstrated how Xankari literature incorporated Islamic influences – the language of the *Katha Guru Sarits* that celebrate the lives of the Xankari saints, for instance, lends itself to a study of Persian influences upon it. The same *Sarits* can also be studied for the influences of the vocabulary, idioms and syntax of the Bodo and other indigenous languages upon the development of the Axamiyā language (*ibid.*: 14–15).

This language has been established as a New Indo-Aryan (NIA) language whose roots lie in the Magadhi Apabhramsa (B. K. Barua 1978 [1964]: 5–6), which is also the ancestor of the modern Oriya and Bengali languages (Grierson 1967 [1909]: 125–26). But as in the case

of Hinduism, which came from mainland India and was forced to adapt to and adopt elements from the non-Aryan/indigenous religions, the language that developed in Assam also had to synergise with the non-Aryan languages and dialects of the indigenous communities of the land. In his seminal study of the formation and development of the Axamiyā language, Banikanta Kakati has identified the various non-Aryan influences as follows: '(1) Austro-Asiatic: – (a) Khasi; (b) Kolarian and (c) Malayan. (2) Tibeto-Burman: – Bodo; (3) Thai-Ahom' (1962 [1941]: 25).

Kakati's study, undertaken in the 1930s, was a continuation of the tradition of Axamiyā writing that had, since the advent of the colonial rulers, been applying itself towards dispelling the myth that Axamiyā was nothing but a dialect of Bengali. This myth propagated by a section of the Bengali middle class, imported into Assam since the early 19th century by the colonial rulers to aid them in administering their newly acquired province, found stiff resistance among the nascent Axamiyā middle class who felt their identity and economy being equally threatened by the immigrants. References to their non-Aryan neighbours and contextualising Axamiyā as an identity and a language that developed under influences independent of neighbouring Bengal was one means of reclaiming their difference. Even Bengali scholars, including Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, lent credence to these claims when they asserted that though Bengali and Axamiyā shared a common origin, 'Assamese under her independent kings and her social life entirely self-contained, became an independent speech, although her sister dialect, North Bengali, accepted the vassalage of the literary speech of Bengal' (S. K. Chatterjee 1926: 148).

In countering Bengali hegemony and trying to chart out a unique identity, Axamiyā scholars have traditionally positioned their language and nationality as an admixture of both Aryan and non-Aryan influences. However, starting from the early days of the Axamiyā nation-building process, under the tide of Indianisation that gradually swept through Assam, more and more emphasis came to be laid upon the Aryan influences. The Hindu educated elite was at the helm of this process of nation-building, and it was keen to rediscover, and where necessary invent, ties with mainland India. In the case of the language as well, despite taking occasional recourse to the non-Aryan influences, a parallel and often more potent trend emerged – that of the Sanskritisation of its lexicon and written form.

When the American missionaries first set up their printing presses in Upper Assam and started publishing books and journals (the *Orunodoi* started in 1846 being the first Axiāmiyā journal) in the language of the local population, they also strived to create a new grammar and script for the language in keeping with its spoken form. The sounds of this spoken language, for instance, could not be adequately represented through use of the English alphabet. At the same time, the Devnagari of mainland India, on which its alphabets were based, had more sounds than were needed for representing the sounds of the Axiāmiyā language, which were also, in some cases, quite different from that in Devanagari (Prabhakara 1983b).

The attempt of the missionaries to modify the orthography by dropping the vestigial alphabets of the existent script, however, did not find many takers under the rapid onslaught of Indianisation already mentioned. It was pronounced unscientific and dealt a decisive blow in 1892 by Hemchandra Barua's compilation of a new dictionary of the Axiāmiyā language, *Hemkox*, which was based on 'the deeply held (and, no doubt, historically valid) conviction that the Assamese language is a cognate of Sanskrit; that howsoever one may pronounce a word, its written form has to reflect its proper etymology' (Prabhakara 1983b). The modified orthography would no doubt have codified the language in the form which was in use among the people and which reflected the synergy of Aryan and non-Aryan elements, while also giving it an identity further removed from its mainland Indian origins. But as it stood, *Hemkox* and the trend of Sanskritisation it represented prevailed, even to the extent that attempts were made from time to time to impose a Sanskrit etymology to many Axiāmiyā words of indigenous origin. This has led to many differences of opinion. The Aryan tradition, for instance, traces the origin of the name of Assam's biggest river, the Brahmaputra, to Hindu mythology, according to which the river is the son of the creator of the universe, Brahma. Others more attuned to the non-Aryan influences on the Axiāmiyā language and culture maintain that the word 'Brahmaputra' is a later Aryanised version of 'Bhullung Buthur', a Bodo nomenclature that refers to the loud noise made by the flowing waters of the mighty river (Rabha 2008: 936).

The key to understanding the true nature of Axiāmiyā identity lies somewhere in between these two seemingly polarised stands. As the discussion above shows, both Aryan and non-Aryan influences have shaped the changing contours of the land and the culture, nature

and ethnicity of its people. Axamiyā is only the end product of the amalgamation of these two influences. Neither Aryan nor non-Aryan elements can fully claim ownership of this identity.

Cultural Manifestations

Such an admixture of influences that led to the formation of the Axamiyā identity is also to be found in the various cultural forms and festivals of Assam. More than in the other festivals, this is perhaps manifested most prominently in the Axamiyā national festival of Bihu. Bihu, more specifically the Rangāli Bihu,¹⁰ is celebrated in spring in the month of Bahāg, the first month of the Axamiyā calendar, which corresponds to mid-April. As folklorist Lila Gogoi (1988: 1) points out, Aryan, Austric, Mongolian, and Alpine elements are so closely intertwined in the Bihu festival that it is almost impossible to separate them analytically. Celebrated by almost all the communities of Assam, it is inspired by the seasonal changes and the commensurately changing agricultural cycles.

In the Aryan tradition, Bahāg Bihu commemorates a particularly auspicious alignment of the planets and stars, and the song and dance of Bihu exemplifies the merriment of Lord Krishna with his female companions in Vrindavan (P. D. Goswami 1996[1975]: 1–4). According to non-Aryan, pre-dominantly agrarian, traditions, the celebration of spring is the celebration of the earth's renewed fertility, and the belief is that singing erotic songs (Bihu songs are often extremely erotic) and dancing sexually suggestive dances (as the Bihu dances are indeed) near the paddy fields augment the earth's reproductive capabilities (Gogoi 1988: 4). As Axamiyā society evolved into an agriculture society over the centuries, the Bihu festival understandably grew in significance for the people. The different communities, of course, celebrate the festival under different names – it is Baikhu for the Rabhas, Āli Āye Lrigāng for the Misings and Baisāgu for the Bodos (cf. D. K. Phukan 1988: 22; Basumatary 1996 [1975]: 38). By amalgamating various elements, rituals, song and dance forms, and so on, from these and the other spring festivals of the non-Aryan communities with the Aryan traditions – like the worship of the cow (Gogoi 1988: 4) – Bihu was born as a uniquely Axamiyā festival, to which almost every community of Assam could claim to have lent some elements, but none could assert sole ownership.

A study of the history of the evolution of this festival and its elevation to the stature of the most important festival of Assam would also

be a study of the role played in the synthesis discussed above by the various forces contributing towards its evolution: geographical proximity, mobility of the population and political will (the role of the pre-colonial rulers). The constant mobility of populations to and within Assam has already been discussed in an earlier section of this chapter. This and the growing cosmopolitanism resultant upon close settlements led, no doubt, to much give and take of cultures and social mores among communities. The different political set-ups from time to time also contributed significantly to the mobility and mixing of peoples. There were many small and big kingdoms in existence in Assam before the Ahoms unified the land. Many like the once-mighty Kachari or Chutiya kings had extended the contours of their kingdoms and spheres of influence far and wide before surrendering to the Ahom might. Lesser rulers from smaller ethnic groups who controlled limited territories also made forays from time to time into neighbouring kingdoms, thus encouraging contact with other ethnic groups. However, it was the Ahom rulers who popularised Bihu and gave it the shape of a national festival (P. D. Goswami 1996 [1975]: 3). They patronised the festival and celebrated Bihu performances in their palace grounds. From being scattered among communities singing and dancing in the open fields and in their respective villages, Bihu thus came to be institutionalised and to have a formal setting.

While exploring the path taken by the festival to reach its present form, though, one cannot ignore the ambiguity with which the more Aryanised (read Hindu) section of the Axamiyā community has always viewed Bihu. Although in present times, Bihu is equated with the Axamiyā identity, there have been periods in history when the non-Aryan antecedents and elements of the festival have been disparaged. Bihu songs and dances, related as they were to fertility and eroticism, were considered risqué. 'It can be surmised that after losing their independence, the educated Axamiyā people either lost their national consciousness or under the influence of the imported Hindu orthodoxy from Bengal began to abandon their former customs and traditions' (ibid.: 4).

Attempts were also made to sanitise all those elements considered too 'indecent' for popular consumption (ibid.: 5). The loss thus incurred by the original nature of the festival and its festivities has sustained to some extent even though subsequent outlooks were

modified and successful attempts were made to reinstate Bihu as the national festival. Other non-Aryan elements of the Axamiyā identity have also suffered a similar fate.

AXAMIYĀ: AN INTERETHNIC IDENTITY

Scholarship focusing on a developmental approach towards inter-group relations has indicated that ethnic identity is seen as changing from a less mature to more mature form over time (D. Newman 2005), and an increasingly mature ethnic identity is assumed to be associated with more open and positive inter-group attitudes (Phinney, Jacoby and Silva 2007: 478). An ethnic identity in its turn has been described from this perspective as ‘that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’ (Tajfel 1978: 63).¹¹

The knowledge of and emotional attachment to the collective is what cements an ethnic group together. Ethnic identity, however, is not fixed but variable, and this is what accounts for the possibilities of assimilation or integration on the one hand and of pluralism or separatism on the other in the course of contact and communication across ethnic groups (Kim 2006: 291). Between these seeming polarities of inter-group interface, there lies another potential: one that leads to identity transformation and the formation of an interethnic identity. An interethnic identity is one ‘that transcends the perimeters of a particular ethnic tradition and one that is capable of embracing and incorporating seemingly divergent ethnic elements into one’s own unique worldview’ (ibid.: 293). Such an identity incorporates both ‘individuation’, allowing for ‘a clear self-definition and definition of the other’ and ‘universalization’ which is a ‘synergistic cognition’ that recognises universal humanity while being aware of the relative nature of values. This helps in overcoming ‘ethnic parochialism and forming a wider circle of identification’ (ibid.: 293–94).

Based on this, and in the light of the exploration in the preceding sections, of the foundation and growth of identity in Assam, one can safely conclude that the Axamiyā identity that developed in pre-colonial Assam is best defined as an interethnic identity, one that was ‘less dualistic and more synergistic’ (ibid.: 294). Such a definition can also shed light upon some of the questions and confusions raised in

the introductory section of this chapter regarding Axamiyā identity. It is because Axamiyā had developed as an interethnic identity that Malati *burhi* could lay claims to being an Axamiyā while still being attached to her Tai-Ahom ancestry. This also explains why, despite her doubts regarding their Axamiyā identity, the Kachari soldiers in Burma were yet entitled to call themselves Axamiyā. Thus, the interethnic nature of the Axamiyā identity allowed for the individuation of the many communities living in the land, while it was itself the end product of the universalisation of their identities.

Modern scholarship lauds ethnic transformation in this direction as promising 'greater fitness in our increasingly interfaced world' (Kim 2006: 292), a world that has seen globalisation and turbulent migration¹² gathering force. Pre-colonial Assam and the Northeast as a whole had already witnessed such population movements and 'a stretching of social, political and economic activities across political frontiers, regions and continents' which characterise modern-day globalisation (Held 2002: 59). It is little wonder then that the Axamiyā identity developed along interethnic lines. The ruling dynasties adopted the Hindu religion that could not but syncretise elements of the non-Aryan/indigenous religions and patronised the Axamiyā language, which also developed through a synergy of the Aryan and non-Aryan elements of the various communities living in the land. As a result, ideologies like mono-culturalism or monism of the kind that have been institutionalised in the Western world, especially Europe, since ancient times and in America since the 19th century (Goldberg 1994; Parekh 2000) could not grow roots in Assam.

With the coming of the colonial rulers, however, there also occurred a break with Axamiyā interethnicity, and the fathers of the Axamiyā nation-building process began to advocate more and more the assimilationist melting-pot model which was in reality nothing but another form of mono-culturalism being gradually introduced into the discourse. Two major influences were responsible for this. The first was the influence of neighbouring Bengal where most of the Axamiyā elite and nascent middle class was being educated and indoctrinated into Western ideology. Bengali nationalism, which had had almost a century's head start over Axamiyā nationalism to shape itself in opposition to British imperialism, was shaping itself along monolithic lines – the assimilation of North Bengali culture and language within the ambit of the greater Bengali nationalism, for instance, was pointed

out by noted linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (1926: 148). At the same time, the pioneers of the Axamiyā nation-building exercise were keen to shape Axamiyā as a sub-nation of the great Indian nationality. In order to do so, they began identifying Axamiyā more and more with the Aryan elements in its make-up. In the next chapter, I will discuss in detail the way in which the Axamiyā identity was subsequently hijacked by one section of the people. Suffice here to say that as in the case of most other identity formations, an interethnic identity is not an *a priori* entity; its formation is the result of a '*stress-adaptation-growth dynamic* (that) underlies a continual dialectical process of push and pull, or identity engagement and disengagement' (Kim 2006: 292). Significantly, 'moments of intense stress can reverse the process of identity transformation at any time; individuals may regress toward reidentifying with their origins, having found the alienation and malaise involved in maintaining a new identity too much of a strain' (ibid.).

The result is marginalisation and/or identity conflicts. The inter-ethnic, generic Axamiyā identity also suffered a severe blow because of a reversal of the process of identity transformation of the various ethnic communities in Assam. The resultant conflicts caused by retribalisation have left the land in the throes of bloody ethnic violence and confounded the concept of Axamiyā identity to the extent that a definition of the term, even for its use in official matters, has become quite impossible.



NOTES

1. 'Ingroup' and 'outgroup' are concepts that have been applied to the study of identity and inter-group behaviour by social-identity theorists such as Brewer (1979), Tajfel and Turner (1986), Tarrant (2002), and Yee and Brown (1992).
2. The Buranjis are considered to be the first authoritative histories of Assam (Gait 2001 [1905]; Sarkar 2003; Wade 1972 [1800]). Their objectivity, however, may have been often overrated (Sarkar 2003: 2–3), being as they were records of a dynasty that, like most other monarchies and dynasties, sought legitimacy to rule by ascribing to itself a divine origin. Still, scholars have pointed to the accounts of 'Muhammadan writers' as corroborating their evidence. These 'Muhammadan writers' had mostly accompanied the Muslim rulers who had been coming to Assam with the

intention of conquest since the 13th century AD but could never really grow roots here. Over and above these writings, 'the contents and dates of the Buranjis are confirmed by rock inscriptions, copper-plate grants and coins' (ibid.: 3).

3. Wade writes that 'strangers of every description and country were scrupulously denied admission into Assam' and that only two Europeans before him 'have obtained access into the kingdom': one a native of Holland 'who attended the Moghul army, was taken prisoner, conducted to the capital, and afterwards liberated', and the second a French traveller named Chevalier, who 'obtained the property of Chandernagore, embarked a considerable property, it is said, at Dacca, on a fleet of boats, and proceeded to the confines of Assam' (1972 [1800]: 339).
4. Barua's *Āxām Buranjī*, written in 1875 and published in 1884, has been described as 'the first political history [of Assam] with a modern approach' (S. Sarma 1989: i).
5. Geographers have been long accused of dealing with an 'emotionally barren terrain, a world devoid of passion, spaces ordered solely by rational principles and demarcated according to political, economic or technical logics' (Bondi, Davidson and Smith 2005: 1). Emotional geographies, however, study the 'felt dimensions of encounters with place' (Conradson 2005: 103), the 'connection, pleasure, desire, love and attachment' with place, thus offering a 'promising avenue through which to advance understandings of dynamic geographies of difference, exclusion and oppression' (Bondi, Davidson and Smith 2005: 8).
6. Internally colonised minorities experience the following: '(1) they are forcibly made to exist in a society that is not their own; (2) they are subjugated to the extent that their social mobility is limited and their political involvement restricted; and (3) their own culture is depreciated or even extinguished. As a result, the colonized group becomes trapped in a caste-like situation. This, in turn, affects that group's self conception: it accepts the "superior" ways of life of the colonizing group and tends to view itself as inferior' (Banton 2004: 209).
7. It is a different matter that Xankardeb's followers eventually introduced many inflexible rules and rigors into the faith he had propagated.
8. An often-raised contention is that Hinduism is not a 'converting' religion or, in other words, practitioners of Hinduism do not proselytise. But historically, in the case of the indigenous/ethnic communities of Assam, there was active proselytising under the aegis of the *xattras*, or Vaishnavite monasteries. In fact, the phrases '*xaran luā*' and '*xaran diyā*' (to seek and grant refuge, respectively) are used to depict this process that takes place between the *goxāi* (proselytiser) who heads the *xattra* and the *xisya* (or neophyte).
9. Those opposed to the distinction made between the two traditions, of course, contend that it is 'an ahistorical artifact of anthropological enquiry'

given that ‘the great tradition for religions like Hinduism and Buddhism consists of a variable selection of texts written in widely different historical periods yet often presented as if they were a synchronic totality’ (Tambiah 1970, quoted in Stewart 2002: 406).

10. In all, there are three Bihus – Rangāli (Bahāg), Bhogāli (Māgh) and Kangāli (Kāti).
11. This is the psychological perspective adopted by social-identity theorists. In sociological research, as well as from the viewpoint of cultural anthropology, various other factors are taken into consideration while defining an ethnic group.
12. ‘Turbulence is not just a useful noun for describing the unsettling effect of an unexpected force that alters your course of movement; it is also a metaphor for the broader levels of interconnection and interdependency between the various forces that are in play in the modern world . . . In the absence of structured patterns of global migration, with direct causes and effects, turbulence is the best formulation for the mobile processes of complex self-organisation that are now occurring. These movements may appear chaotic, but there is a logic and order within them’ (Papastergiadis 2000: 4).

Three

Identity, Interrupted

Nation-building and the Break with Interethnicity



DISRUPTION IN IDENTITY FORMATION

The disruption of the development of Axamiyā as an interethnic identity laid the foundation of ethnic fragmentation, which led in subsequent decades to ethnic conflicts in Assam. Certain colonial administrative policies and prevalent socio-economic factors were responsible for setting into motion the process of disengagement of the various ethnic groups and communities from the Axamiyā identity. They congealed the boundaries between ethnic groups and created new margins of administration, while encouraging population influx which only emphasised these divides.

Ethnic Boundaries

Donald Horowitz (1985) has suggested that the inclusion of two or more ethnic groups within a territorial state creates the basis for conflicts. The formation of the independent Indian State, and the inclusion of multi-ethnic Assam and the rest of the Northeast¹ within the territorial limits of that State, was perhaps one of the most important factors responsible for the outbreak of ethnic conflicts in the region as a whole. But even before the Indian State came into being in 1947, the stage for the ‘post’-colonial conflicts had already been set by colonial policies of administration and governance that institutionalised markers of ethnic difference.

Many of these policies and tools of governance were adapted by the nascent Indian State, indicative of the ‘colonial mimicry’² that characterises most of the ‘post’-colonial world. The decennial census conducted in India, for example, is a continuation of the enumeration

and classification practised by the colonial rulers intent on collecting 'reliable data on subject population' (V. Das 2007: 3).

The British colonial state instituted a new way of collecting information in the form of maps, settlement reports, revenue records, statistical information, censuses, enquiry commission reports, compendiums of laws and custom and folklore, to name a few. This new form of governance ... had a decisive influence on the shaping of caste and communal identities in the twentieth century. (Ibid.: 24)

Based on the first reliable census held in colonial Assam in 1872, W. W. Hunter, Director General of Statistics to the then Government of India, tabulated the 'Ethnical Division of the People' of the various districts of Assam under three main heads: 'Non-Asiatics' (including Europeans and Americans), 'Mixed Races' (that is, Eurasian) and 'Asiatics' (Hunter 1982 [1879]). The Asiatics were then divided into 'Other than Natives of India and British Burma' and 'Natives of India and British Burma'. The latter category consisted of 'Aboriginal Tribes'; 'Semi-Hinduised Aborigines'; 'Hindus'; 'Persons of Hindu Origin not recognising Caste'; 'Muhammadans'; and 'Burmese' (ibid.: 30–31). These categories were arbitrary to a large extent, with a lot of overlaps, and many of them have now become obsolete through natural assimilation and ethnic passing³ between communities. They did, however, introduce a sense of differentiation along ethnic lines, something that 600 years of Ahom rule had avoided to a great extent.⁴

A highly feudal society had grown up under Ahom administration and class distinctions were quite prominent. However, ethnic or religious divisions were by and large not taken into consideration while conferring offices and administrative responsibilities. Thus, Hindus and Muslims, Ahoms and non-Ahoms were all granted offices and titles. Many of these titles are used to this day, making ready identification of religious, ethnic or caste identities quite difficult in Assam, unlike in most parts of mainland India. As a migrant community trying to establish their predominance over the earlier inhabitants of the land, the Ahoms were also very accommodative of ethnic, cultural and religious differences. They adopted Hindu customs and practices in their many forms (like the contrary strains of Shaktism and Vaishnavism) that held sway at any given time over the centuries in Assam's history. They were thus instrumental in setting in motion

the creation of the interethnic Axamiyā identity. As they gradually started incorporating under their administration the smaller kingdoms of the Morans, the Chutiyas, the Borahis, and others, they also began marrying into the communities they subjugated. Such intermarriage caused identity transformation and created new ethnic identities, such as the Ahom–Chutiya identity mentioned earlier. All these ethnic identities then engaged to evolve towards the Axamiyā interethnicity. Under the circumstances, ethnic conflicts of the kind we see festering today did not take place during the Ahom rule.

Drawing upon the discussions of Sudipto Kaviraj (1992) and Bernard S. Cohn (1987) relating to the fallout of the enumeration and numerical description of Indian – and South Asian – communities by the colonial regime, Partha Chatterjee has shown how

earlier, communities were fuzzy, in the sense that, first, a community did not claim to represent or exhaust all the layers of selfhood of its members, and second, the community, though definable with precision for all practical purposes of social interaction, did not require its members to ask how many of them there were in the world. The colonial regime, once firmly in place in the second half of the nineteenth century, sought to fashion the conceptual instruments of control over an alien population precisely by enumerating the diverse communities that, in the colonial imagination, constituted the society over which it had been destined by History to rule. (1994: 223)

This ‘classificatory scheme’, he goes on to state, did not remain confined to the colonial imagination but filtered down to the colonial subject, and shaped, as Cohn has also pointed out, ‘the subsequent forms of mobilization seeking representation in the state domain’ (ibid.). Though Kaviraj, Cohn and Chatterjee were discussing caste- and religion-based communities, the same is equally applicable to the ethnic communities of Northeast India. While ethnicity became more and more important ‘both conceptually and instrumentally’ in the enumeration of communities in Assam and the Northeast as one of the ‘sociological keys’ to the ‘numerical description of the population’ (ibid.), the ethnic boundaries between communities also congealed further and further. And this process continued into the ‘post’-colonial period when communities like the Bodos, who had given generously of themselves to the formation of the interethnic Axamiyā identity, began to demand separation from not just the Axamiyā identity but also from the ‘post’-colonial state of Assam. Others, such as the Ahoms

and the Chutiyas, are also engaged in charting out independent identities for themselves, reclaiming their identities, distinct from each other and from the Axamiyā identity as a whole.

Boundaries of Administration

When the colonisers first came to Assam, it was not just the ethnic boundaries between communities that they found fuzzy. In his 1907 Romanes Lecture on 'Frontiers', Lord Curzon of Kedleston, Viceroy of India (1898–1905) and British Foreign Secretary (1919–1924), remarked on the 'strong instinctive aversion to the acceptance of fixed boundaries' in the Asian continent as a whole given the 'dislike of precise arrangements that is typical of the oriental mind'. He put forward a few other Orientalist presumptions as explanations for the absence of fixed boundaries and advocated 'settled' frontiers and a well-defined frontier policy as being of utmost importance to nations.

The pre-modern Ahom kingdom of the Brahmaputra valley, however, shared an unsettled northern frontier with the Bhutanese kingdom of the Himalayas, and such a frontier policy worked well enough for the rulers of both kingdoms before the advent of the British. A system of periodical revenue collection by rotation between the Ahom and the Bhutanese kingdoms had been devised in the Duars which marked this frontier, and neither king had absolute control over its administration. Indeed, there was no centralised administration of the Duars as a whole. Each of the Duars was traditionally ruled by petty rulers known as *raikats/zamindars* and *rajas*, who held hereditary rights over the territory and paid taxes or tributes to the surrounding powerful regimes, while maintaining some amount of autonomy over the administration of their particular Duar; only occasionally was the ruler of a Duar appointed by the Bhutanese king (Bhuyan 1974; Hamilton 1987).

With the coming of the colonial administration though, frontiers came to be shaped as 'the razor's edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, of life or death to nations' and their two-fold role now became delimitation and defence (Kedleston 1907). If Assam and the Northeast were shaped as the last frontier of the British Empire in India, it continues even today to be the last frontier in the imagination of the 'post'-colonial Indian State as well.

Within the region itself, new delimitations of territory were introduced so that even as ethnic boundaries congealed, administrative

boundaries emphasised them. The hill–valley divide, which was to create much upheaval in the ‘post’-colonial politics of Assam, was introduced in the British period. The British province of Assam entrusted to a chief commissioner was formed in 1874, by the end of which year it comprised the plains of Assam, including the Barak (Surma)⁵ and Brahmaputra valleys, as well as many of the hill districts, including the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, and Cachar Hills, as well as parts of the Naga and Lushai (Mizo) Hills⁶ (Guha 1977: 1–28). While the plains people, including the Axamiyā peasantry, had initially ‘reacted to the [British] regime with mixed feelings’ (ibid.: 8), from the outset, many of the hill tribes resented British interference in their administration. After all, ‘until the British advent, the notion of territorial or political authority was unknown in the hills’ (Chaube 1999 [1973]: 7). Ostensibly, the colonisers followed the existent Ahom policy of dealing with the hill tribes, which was based on ‘conciliation, backed by a display of force when it could be effectively applied. Complete subjugation of the tribes, and annexation of their territories to the Ahom kingdom was never envisaged by the rulers’ (Bhuyan 1974: 33–34).

Early colonial legislations, such as Act VI of 1835, had tried to bring some of the hill areas – in the case of this Act, the Khasi and Cachar Hills – under direct colonial control in matters of criminal and civil justice and revenue. By 1869, however, the Garo Hills Act (Act XXII) was passed and extended to other hill areas subsequently to remove them from the jurisdiction of the civil, criminal and revenue courts of the plains. Such segregation was emphasised by the creation, under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, of Inner Lines beyond which ‘the tribes are left to manage their own affairs’ (Chaube 1999 [1973]: 12–15). Some of these Inner Lines were not discontinued in ‘post’-colonial India, and are still in effect in present-day Northeast. They continue to emphasise the differences between communities and regions, and are often used as rallying points around ethnic as well as indigenous–settler conflicts in various parts of the region.

The Inner Lines had been drawn ‘to prohibit any subject living outside the area from living or moving therein’. In practice, however, ‘local officials took every opportunity to extend their authority’ beyond these lines, permitting only themselves and ‘persons approved by them, like missionaries, within the zone’ (Chaube 1999 [1973]: 15–16). Subsequent legislations provided for the creation of administrative areas that were largely inhabited by the frontier tribes

and were at various points of time under different legislations called 'backward tracts', 'agency areas' and 'excluded areas'. They were all effectively labels that propounded the myth of 'protective discrimination', but did not in reality protect the regions from the commercial onslaught of European entrepreneurs, the political influence of the colonisers and the religious proselytising of the missionaries. They did, however, instill a sense of difference among the hill people vis-à-vis the people of the plains. This sense of difference can be gauged by the fact that at the time of the transfer of power to India, in 1946, the Khasi-Jaintia Political Association, for one, presented a memorandum to the Cabinet Mission and other representatives of the British administration to form a federation for the Khasi-inhabited areas within Assam with adequate 'cultural and political autonomy' (Chaube 1999 [1973]: 75).

In stark contrast to this, the plains tribes had not initially been segregated by the colonial rulers, either territorially or administratively, from the rest of the population of the Assam valley. As a result, when the Statutory Commission on Constitutional Reform 1929 (popularly known as the Simon Commission) visited Assam, representatives of the Bodo-Kachari community, one of the largest plains tribes of Assam, submitted a memorandum before the commission claiming an identity not 'other than Assamese' (B. Singh 2002: 95). However, differences began to be emphasised soon after, mainly for political expediency.

The Government of India Act 1935, which contributed much to the 'advance in the sphere of provincial Government', allowed for four seats from the 'Backward Plains Tribal' special constituencies of Assam, having expanded the provision for segregated electorates (Guha 1977: 218–20). Rupnath Brahma, a Bodo leader, was elected under the banner of the Assam Plains Tribal League, which had been in existence since 1933. In the aftermath of the first elections to the Assam Legislative Assembly under the 1935 Act, held in 1937, successive governments failed to hold fort for too long. It was then that Indian National Congress leader Gopinath Bordoloi, in an effort to topple the Muslim League government in power and gain the allegiance of the tribal leaders, 'raised the bogey of tribal people in plains losing their lands to immigrants' (ibid.: 229). His demands for a protective system of tribal belts and better education for the tribal populations helped him in forming a coalition government with the Tribal League in September 1938 (ibid.). However, a decade thereafter,

in November 1948, he managed to alienate the entire plains tribal population of Assam when in the Constituent Assembly debates, he argued against providing any special protection for the plains tribes along the lines of the Sixth Schedule⁷ of the Indian constitution, which was decided upon by the Assembly to provide autonomy to the hill people. In the joint report of the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas (other than Assam) Sub-Committee and the North East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee, it was reasoned that such provisions were not needed for the plains tribals since they were 'of course a population which has assimilated in high degree the life of the plains' (Constituent Assembly Debates 1948).

Population Influx

Provisions were, however, made in 'post'-colonial Assam for a few tribal belts and blocks – of the kind mentioned by Gopinath Bordoloi in 1938 – to safeguard the lands of the plains tribals. Unbridled immigration had led to large-scale land alienation and loss of livelihood in the colonial period not just among the indigenous/tribal peoples but also among the non-indigenous Axamiyā. The encouragement provided by the British colonisers to migrants from various parts of their Indian empire to come to Assam also interrupted the process of the development of Axamiyā interethnicity and eventually led to ethnic conflicts.

The migrants included a large number of people belonging to different communities from mainland India who could now have easy access to and commerce with the newly acquired territory of the British Empire. Thus, more Marwari traders from Rajasthan came in to fill the niche created by the new administrative set-up, take advantage of the newly introduced money economy and exploit the rich natural resources of the land. There was another category of migrants from mainland India who were forcibly brought into Assam to act as cheap labour in the lucrative, newly established tea plantations. These were the Adivasis,⁸ or tribal populations recruited from various provinces of central, eastern and western India, including Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, United Provinces, Madras, and the Central Provinces.⁹ Independent of these recruits, there was also another category of Adivasis, mainly the Santhals, who came to Assam as cultivators, encouraged by the free passage and interest-free advances

being provided by the colonisers since 1888 to come and settle in the wastelands of Goalpara district (Barpujari 2004b).

From Bengal came both Hindu and Muslim migrants. The educated Hindu middle-class Bengalis started arriving immediately after the coming of the British to Assam in 1826. In a letter (vol. 38, no. 88) issued in April 1868 to the chief commissioner of Assam by Major Campbell, Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, it was clearly stated: 'It is not at all possible to find in Assam a candidate of sufficient ability and fill some of the more important posts. (Therefore) it becomes necessary to import men from Calcutta and other parts of Bengal' (quoted in Sajal Nag 1990: 45).

Thus, more and more Bengalis came to be employed in 'white-collar' jobs since they had already – through exposure to almost a century-long colonial administration – acquired Western education and a familiarity with the British system of administration. They mostly occupied the low- or middle-ranking administrative offices. Besides, East Bengali Hindu migrants also came as petty traders and usurers, shopkeepers and middlemen.

Then there were the Muslim migrants from East Bengal, and they were the most numerous. They were pulled to Assam by the new wasteland¹⁰ settlement rules drawn up by the colonisers to attract cultivators to till fallow lands and help raise more revenue. The result of such large-scale immigration was that the non-indigenous (mostly migrant) population of Assam proper increased from less than 100,000 in 1872 to 500,000–600,000 in 1901 (Guha 1977: 39). The population increased by a steep 26.9 per cent in the period between 1911 and 1921. Of this, three-fifths was attributed to migration (Mullan 1932). Of all the migrant communities that came to Assam, the Bengali Hindus and the Muslim peasants from East Bengal, before long, began to face the overt animosity of the autochthonous populations, including the Bodo- and the Axamiyā-speaking people.

The Muslim peasants came in continuous waves of migration in large numbers and settled wherever they saw land was available. Hard-working, more enterprising and well-acquainted with the money economy, they had an edge over the autochthonous agriculturist, who soon began to feel threatened. The Axamiyā middle class also found that these migrants had the political backing of a section of the Barak-valley Bengali Hindu leadership, who played the linguistic card whenever opposition arose against their settlement. More significantly, the migrants had the Muslim League leadership of Assam

backing them and leaders from East Bengal, like Maulana Bhasani, egging them on to continue immigrating and settling in Assam. To add to this, incendiary statements were also being made by colonial administrators, for instance, by Census Superintendent C. S. Mullan and revenue member of the Assam Legislative Council, W. L. Scott, which added divisive fuel to the already fiery politics (U. Goswami 2010a:13). Communal fires were also fanned by British Viceroy Archibald Percival Wavell in 1943 when he described the 'Grow More Food' programme of the Assam government as, in fact, a scheme to 'Grow More Muslims' (Moon 1977 [1973]). It did not help that the head of the local self-government in colonial Assam at the time was Mohammad Saadulla, one of the most seasoned politicians of Assam, who was nonetheless a man torn between the two identities of being an Axamiyā and of being a Muslim (U. Goswami 2010a: 14).

Ostensibly to contain the indiscriminate settlement of the immigrants, the colonial government devised the Line System in 1920 which created different categories of villages, determining where the immigrants could settle and drawing lines between them and the autochthons. In practice, however, these lines were never sacrosanct. Among the people actually affected by the issue – immigrant and autochthonous agriculturists alike – it merely limited the access of certain people to certain resources, encouraged *ghettoisation* and drew lines across race, language, religion, and class. But those who really gained from it were the pro- and anti-immigrant political leaders who had found a tool around which they rallied to strengthen their support base and advance their political careers (U. Goswami 2010a: 14).

Its patent failure called for a rethink of the system, and in 1938, the Line System Enquiry Committee (LSEC) tabled its report. Significant among its findings was the fact that a section of the Axamiyā land-owners – and not just the immigrant 'landholders and leading men' – was also involved in settling migrants for a price (M. Kar 1990). Indeed, when the colonisation and wasteland-settlement schemes were being drawn up, many among the Axamiyā middle and land-owning classes had encouraged and welcomed the immigrants. As the political climate changed and the Muslim League seemed to be gaining the support of the numerically plentiful immigrants and forming governments, the leaders among the Axamiyā community, whose overwhelming support was for the Indian National Congress with its barely disguised Hindu bias, began to speak for the autochthonous peasants' rights. In doing so, leading politicians like Gopinath

Bordoloi were even willing to raise the issue of tribal rights as distinct from the rights of other non-indigenous autochthons of Assam. The nascent leadership of the indigenous autochthons was still numerically small, but they had also begun to express themselves by the time the LSEC was constituted. Rabichandra Kachari, a Bodo leader and representative of the plains tribals in the LSEC, voiced the concerns of the indigenous communities in the face of unbridled immigrant influx. The LSEC concurred that the indigenous autochthons were the worst affected by the aggressive land-grabbing of the immigrants, and suggested the formation of particular areas of restriction against encroachment.

The 'Tribal Belts and Blocks' formed in 'post'-colonial Assam were based on these recommendations, but they could not be implemented in the politically unstable decade between the tabling of the report and the change of regime. Once they were, though, these Belts and Blocks became rallying points around which indigenous autochthons began to demand territorial rights and political privileges distinct from those of the non-indigenous autochthons. Thus, what had started in the colonial period as a conflict between the autochthonous and migrant communities as a result of competition over limited natural, political and economic resources, led to infighting among the autochthonous communities themselves in the 'post'-colonial period: the conflict between the Axamiyā-speaking people and the Bodo community is a case in point. The way in which the Axamiyā middle class shaped itself and the idea of Axamiyā identity and nationality in the colonial period contributed immensely to this infighting.

NATIONALITY: AT THE COST OF INTERETHNIC IDENTITY

The conflicts between communities did not, of course, erupt all of a sudden. Neither did a decisive break with the Axamiyā interethnic identity occur overnight for the various ethnic communities. As already mentioned, it was a gradual process of reversal that started in the colonial period at the dawn of the Axamiyā nation-building process. Before one goes into a discussion of this reversal and its fallout, it is important to take a look at the period of the formation of the Axamiyā nation as well as at the direction that was given to the development of this national identity. A nation, after all, is a construct and

in Benedict Anderson's (1983) oft-quoted words, an 'imagined community'. It is 'a narrative, a *story* which people tell about themselves in order to lend meaning to their social world' (Ram 1994: 153). To understand the meaning given to the Axamiyā nation, it is necessary to first understand the course and content of this narrative.

Usually, at the helm of creating a national narrative are the middle classes. Partha Chatterjee has pointed out how, beginning in the 19th century, the Calcutta middle class played a pre-eminent role in 'creating the dominant forms of nationalist culture and social institutions in Bengal' (1994: 35–36). In 1885, Axamiyā intellectual Gunabhiram Barua acknowledged that 'whether desirable or not, the Bengali *babu* or *bhadralok* had become the model for the growing Assamese middle class' (quoted in Guha 1977: 68). When this class of people began to change the shape of the Axamiyā identity and create the modern nation, it was in imitation of much of the ideology and politics of Bengali nationalism.

Rejection and the Nation

Imitation, however, is often only a part of the story of nationality formation. In differentiating between 'Western' ('having emerged primarily in western Europe') and 'Eastern' ('to be found in eastern Europe, in Asia and Africa, and also in Latin America') nationalisms, John Plamenatz (1976) has characterised Eastern nationalism as both 'imitative and hostile to the models it imitates'; it is imitative of the value of the standards set by the alien culture, and hostile in a two-fold rejection, both ambivalent: 'rejection of the alien intruder and dominator who is nevertheless to be imitated and surpassed by his own standards, and rejection of ancestral ways which are seen as obstacles to progress and yet also cherished as marks of identity' (quoted in P. Chatterjee 1993 [1986]: 2). For the Axamiyā nation, imitation and rejection of the British coloniser came much later, and only as a result of its imitation and rejection of the domination of the Bengali nation, the model it was based upon.

There was a huge influx of Bengali migrants into Assam following the establishment of colonial rule. While the East Bengali peasants threatened both the land and livelihood of the Axamiyā masses, the Hindu Bengali migrants threatened middle-class respectability and limited their avenues for employment. In 1853, Maniram Dutta Dewan, who was later executed for his role in the Revolt of 1857,

submitted a memorandum to A. J. Moffat-Mills, judge of the Sudder Court on deputation to Assam during the early days of the British administration, complaining about the appointment of 'foreigners', including the 'Bengalees from Sylhet', to important posts in revenue administration. 'For us respectable Assamese', he said, 'to become the ryots (farmers or cultivators) of such foreigners is a source of deep mortification' (Moffat-Mills 1983 [1853]: 607).

Then there was the question of linguistic domination. In 1836, a decade after the British arrived, Bengali, 'a foreign language', was made the official language of Assam, as well as the medium of instruction in schools (A. D. Phukan 1853: 105). It is also true, of course, that the Axamiyā middle class, in the early years of its development, was bred in Bengal. Education in English, especially higher education, which was one of the major factors contributing to the growth of the Axamiyā middle class, was available only in Bengal till a college was founded in Sylhet in 1892 and another in Guwahati in 1901 (Guha 1977: 57). And yet, because of the upper hand this gave the Bengalis in matters of bureaucratic and administrative appointments, the imposition of the Bengali language upon the people of Assam was detested.

Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, a highly educated employee of the British administration, has been described as 'the great pioneer . . . towards the rehabilitation of the people of Assam, their language and education, their culture and polity in the new British regime' (Neog 1977: vii). He questioned the grounds on which Bengali had been allowed to supersede Axamiyā as the court language: 'The Assamese being the Vernacular language as well of the people as of the majority of the judges and ministerial officers of the courts, no inconvenience can possibly arise from its use' (A. D. Phukan 1853: 131). His efforts, with some help from the American Baptist Missionaries, bore fruit when in 1873, Axamiyā was finally recognised as the language of the courts and a medium of instruction in schools.

Meanwhile, changes in the administrative boundaries of colonial Assam led to Bengali-majority areas like Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara becoming parts of Assam. As a result, the census figures showed a drastic increase in the number of Bengali speakers in Assam (A. D. Phukan 1853: 26–28). Fear of being swamped in their own land led the Axamiyā middle class to try and broaden the base of their national definition, and efforts were made to enlist the immigrant communities

into the Axamiyā fold. The Muslims of East Bengali origin responded to these efforts as they saw that their economic future lay in Assam. And while a few leaders of the community had already been championing assimilation into the Axamiyā identity, in the first census of post-independence India, the community overwhelmingly returned its mother tongue as Axamiyā. The percentage of Axamiyā speakers in Assam increased from 32 per cent in 1931 to 62 per cent in 1951. The 15 August 1947 editorial of the nationalist newspaper *Axamiyā* declared:

In the great Indian nation, we are a small people... if we are to live as an autonomous and distinct people, all Axamiyās have to unite. To this assembly we have to welcome the immigrant Muslims. Only then can the Axamiyās assert themselves. We are happy to note such a change of heart among the Axamiyā Muslims. (My translation, Bhagabati 1998: 36)

Going to the extent of naming the Bengali Muslims as ‘Axamiyā’ Muslims, the editorial denounced the ‘Bengalising’ influence of the Hindu Bengalis upon their Muslim counterparts (*ibid.*: 35). The inclusion of the Muslim immigrants within the Axamiyā fold was clearly a point of departure from the model of Bengali nationalism that the Axamiyā middle class was imitating – for Bengali nationalism was being shaped by its founders as a Hindu/Aryan nationalism.

Imitation and the Nation

Hinduism undoubtedly had a predominant influence in the shaping of the Axamiyā interethnic identity. It, however, could not thrive without adapting to and adopting from the non-Aryan indigenous religions. The result was that the nature of the religion itself had changed in Assam. For one, the caste system that characterises most Hindu societies was ‘less rigorous’ among the Axamiyās (Guha 1977: 68). But as the Axamiyā middle class increasingly came in contact with the contemporary Bengali Hindu society of the 19th and 20th centuries, its adherence to caste distinctions also became stricter in imitation of the latter. Hitherto unknown ostentations entered Axamiyā Hindu rituals and social evils like opposition to widow remarriage became more pronounced, all under the influence and emulation of the Bengali Hindu elites (*ibid.*: 68–69). When the Brahmo Movement gained

ground in Bengal to fight against the evils of Hindu orthodoxy, some among the Axamiyā middle class also adopted Brahmoism – and just as the Brahmos were initially ostracised in Bengal, in Assam also, they were largely shunned (R. Saikia 2000: 204–10). Nevertheless, the influence of Hinduism and its reform movements – Brahmoism being a case in point – is evident from the fact that even the nascent middle class among the indigenous autochthons of Assam, more specifically the Bodos, were turning to it to uplift their societies and social institutions (*ibid.*: 210–11), as indigenous beliefs and practices were considered as regressive in the Hindu universe. The denigration of the non-Aryan, indigenous elements of Bihu owing to ‘the imported Hindu orthodoxy from Bengal’ (P. D. Goswami [1996] 1975: 4) has already been discussed. Bengali nationalism, after all, was being shaped as an Aryan nationalism.

In the 1880s, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a source of much inspiration and adulation for the Calcutta-educated Axamiyā middle class of the time,¹¹ was pleading for a history for the Bengali people. In response, Bengali writers declared that a struggle for an independent historiography as well as for an independent nationhood were but struggles against colonialism – and by colonialism, they meant ‘both British rule and Muslim rule’. Bankim Chandra, after all, unequivocally traced the origins of the Bengalis to the ‘glorious Aryans’. For him, the nation – by which he invoked both the Bengali and the Indian nations equally – was first colonised by the Muslims (P. Chatterjee 1994: 76–114). And although the Muslims of Assam were not insignificantly represented in the rising middle-class hierarchy (R. Saikia 2000: 212–13), under the overwhelming influence of Bengali nationalism, a Hindu/Aryan bias set in with regard to the idea of the Axamiyā nation.

This bias grew deeper as Axamiyā nationalism came to be more and more associated with Indian nationalism. At a time when ‘the universal of the nation (the anti-colonial nation) was being produced out of the negotiation of the singulars’, to quote Ranabir Samaddar (2010: 82), Bengali nationalism had joined the universal of the Indian nation. In emulation, so did Axamiyā nationalism. It needs, however, to be noted here that once again, it was the middle class that gradually introduced the idea of Axamiyā as a part of the Indian nation. A product of ‘colonial bureaucracy, English education and tea industry’ (R. Saikia 2000: 163) and one that was ‘at the top of the

social hierarchy' (ibid.: 159), this class of people had already in the 19th century been influenced by the ideals of Indian nationalism, having come in contact with the Indian National Congress (INC) that was leading the pan-Indian anti-colonial movement. Following the Calcutta session of the Congress in 1886, regular participation of representatives from Assam was seen in subsequent sessions elsewhere in India (Guha 1977: 63–64). However, it was only in 1920 that a *pradesh* (provincial) committee of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) was formed in Assam.

Recollections of Congress leader Benudhar Sarma (1971) about the early days of the INC in Assam clearly prove that till the early part of the 20th century, the idea of Assam as a part of the Indian nation had only gained ground in urban centres among the educated middle class. His reminiscences are full of instances where INC volunteers had to co-opt and convert the masses in the villages of Assam to the idea of Indian nationalism. The latter were bewildered when the idea of an Indian nationhood was introduced to them. They saw no reason for the kind of social and political protest that the Congress was advocating. Sharma (1971) recalls how Congress volunteers had to use folk forms and institutions to proselytise and preach the ideals of the INC and Indian nationalism to the village people. Sometimes they would even trick people into joining the organisation. The success of such measures, however, is beyond doubt: popular antagonistic perceptions of Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi prevalent in the Assam of the 1920s (ibid.: 22) were by the 1940s replaced by folk songs that praised Gandhi and the Congress leaders and volunteers, besides expressing anti-colonial sentiments and sending out rousing calls of *bande mataram* (hailing Mother India) (B. M. Goswami 1997). The construction of Axamiyā as a constituent part of Indian nationalism was complete, and as the people who could trace – and had been tracing – their origins to the Indian mainland, the Axamiyā middle-class Hindus now came to identify the Axamiyā nation with themselves.

Break with Interethnic Identity

About the relationship between Hinduism and Indian nationalism, Partha Chatterjee has observed:

The idea that 'Indian nationalism' is synonymous with 'Hindu nationalism' is not the vestige of some premodern religious conception. It is

an entirely modern, rationalist, and historicist idea . . . Its appeal is not religious but political. In this sense, the framework of its reasoning is entirely secular. (1994: 110)

Thus, veteran INC leader Rajendra Prasad, who went on to become the first President of 'post'-colonial India, could suggest countering the threat of Muslim Bengali immigration to Assam under the colonial dispensation by encouraging Hindu migration from the Indian state of Bihar (excerpt from *Maro Atmakatha*, his autobiography, cited in S. C. Kakati 1954), and not be deemed communal. This Hindu India conceived by the founding fathers of the Indian nation saw the modern state – which would be central to the 'life of the nation' – as being 'frankly majoritarian'. The majority 'community' was, of course, Hindu and State policy would reflect that while 'the minorities must accept the leadership and protection of the majority' (P. Chatterjee 1994: 110). Chatterjee argues that this conception of the Hindu-ness of the Indian nation is not 'defined by any religious criteria at all': '[P]eople outside the Brahminical religion and outside caste society are also claimed as part of the Hindu jāti. But clearly excluded from this jāti are religions like Christianity and Islam' (ibid.).

In a similar vein, the Axamiyā nation also came to be shaped as a Hindu nation, and a majoritarian one at that. The majority now comprised the Axamiyā caste Hindu population, who began to dictate the terms of inclusion into the nation for the minorities. They hijacked the Axamiyā identity and chose to ignore the fact that Axamiyā was not one identity but many, indeed an identity in progress, and the result of an interethnic adaptation and growth. On 2 October 1935, Nilmoni Phukan, editor of *Dainik Batori* wrote in the editorial:

In defining Axamiyā, we do not look specifically at religion or community, caste or creed; whoever accepts Axamiyā as their mother tongue, whoever does not maintain a permanent establishment elsewhere in any way while considering himself a temporary guest here in Assam; whose economic interest will be primarily in Assam, we will accept him as Axamiyā. (My translation, Phukan quoted in Bhagabati 1998: 57)

Axamiyā thus became an exclusive club with only conditional membership possible. The Axamiyā language became the sole language to be adopted to the exclusion of the other languages that went into its formation and development. It is true that such a definition

allowed for the inclusion of migrant, non-Hindu communities into the Axamiyā fold as well, but any such inclusion would be based on certain criteria dictated by a handful of people who came to look at the nation as their sole preserve. It is also true that this definition did not specifically exclude the non-Aryan, indigenous communities from its ambit. Such exclusion would have deprived the Axamiyā nation of any distinctiveness, a late entrant as it was in the Indian nation. Forever afterwards, Assam remained India's *numaliā ji*, or youngest daughter, in the Axamiyā popular imagination, but one that could contribute in a unique way to the Indian nation:

It will be realised that Assam's civilisation is not a growth of the unilateral type; it had evolved out of the twin threads of Aryan and non-Aryan culture; and the rapprochement which has been effected in Assam will constitute an energising factor in India's civilisation. (Bhuyan 2009 [1959]: 173)

The Aryan and non-Aryan threads, however, did not get the same pride of place in the Axamiyā national make-up. The non-Aryans were the 'unsophisticated people of Assam' who were 'guided by their powerful instincts rather than by logic and analysis' (Bhuyan 2009 [1955]: 67). Their *raison d'être* was to act as a foil for the Aryan Hindu element in the Axamiyā nation.

The vigour of our primitive tribes has served as a complement to the subtlety [*sic.*] of the intellectual Aryans. The dwindling virility of the ease-loving plainsfolk has been reinvigorated by the elemental energy of the hillmen, whose muscles and sinews are at our eternal command whenever we project any enterprise of valour. (Ibid.: 56)

The Hindu Axamiyā thus became the big brother who could 'command' the allegiance of the 'primitive tribes'. It is worth noting here that in this conception of the tribesmen of Assam, as in Gopinath Bordoloi's representation before the Constituent Assembly, the 'hillmen' receive special mention, whereas the tribes of the plains, such as the Bodos, are conspicuous by their absence. It was mostly this presumption of their assimilation into the Axamiyā nationality without reference to their distinctive ethnic identity that led in subsequent years to the regression of Axamiyā interethnicity and the fragmentation between communities.

NOTES

1. Assam at the time comprised most of what is now the Northeast of India, except for the princely states of Manipur and Tripura.
2. Homi Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as: 'the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite' (1994: 86).
3. 'Although the actors themselves . . . speak as if ethnic boundaries are clear-cut and defined for all time; and think of ethnic collectivities as self-reproducing bounded groups, it is also clear that from a dynamic and procedural perspective, there are many precedents of "passing" and the change of identity, for incorporation and assimilation of new members and for changing the scales and criteria of collective identity' (Tambiah 1989: 335–36).
4. This is not to say that under Ahom rule social and/or ethnic divisions did not exist, or that conflicts did not take place. For instance, the Moamoria revolt that preceded the coming of the British to Assam was mainly a result of discontent against the Ahom rulers among followers of the Moamoria branch of the Xankari religion, which comprised mostly smaller ethnic groups, like the Morans and the Chutiyas. However, it appears that religious/sectarian and socio-economic causes, rather than ethnic differentiation, were the more potent factors stoking the revolt.
5. Sylhet is situated on the banks of the Surma, which is a branch of the Barak river. After Sylhet was made a part of East Pakistan in 1948, Cachar was retained in Assam, and the valley came to be known by the name of the main river, Barak.
6. Of these, only the Cachar Hills remain part of present-day Assam.
7. Articles 244 (2) and 275(1) of the Indian Constitution provide for the Sixth Schedule to apply to the administration of the tribal areas in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The provisions of the schedule include the creation of autonomous districts and autonomous regions, where the elected district and regional councils have powers to legislate on matters relating to land allotment and use, cultivation, appointment of chiefs, inheritance of property, marriage and social customs, among other subjects. Full text available at <http://www.constitution.org/cons/india/shed06.htm> (accessed 29 August 2012).
8. 'Adivasi' literally means 'original inhabitant' and is an umbrella term used to denote the Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Gond, Khond, Kisang, Nagesia, Savara, Godova, Proja, Pankha, Lohar, Ghasi, Turi, and Baurie communities.
9. The United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, or simply the United Provinces, was a province of British India between 1902 and 1947. It comprised most

of the modern-day Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The Central Provinces (and Berar) was another such province comprising much of the present-day states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra. It was formed in 1861.

10. The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation 1886 (Rule 1 [2] [b]) defines 'wasteland' as 'land at the disposal of the Govt. which it has not yet disposed of by lease, grant or otherwise and which is not included in a forest reserve or a proposed forest reserve or a grazing ground' (J. N. Das 2000).
11. Padmanath Gohainborooah, one of the founding fathers of the Axamiyā nation, has written in *Mor Xowarani* (My Reminiscences), his autobiography: 'Just as I would unexpectedly get a glimpse of veteran novelist Bankim *babu* (Bankim Chandra) everyday, I would also keep trying to get a glimpse of the emerging poet of the time, Rabi *babu* (Rabindranath Tagore)' (My translation, Gohainborooah 1987 [1971]: 29).

Four

Ethnic Fragmentation and Divided Communities



The fallout of the breakup of the Axamiyā interethnic identity was twofold: one, it prompted the ethnic components of the Axamiyā identity to dissociate themselves from the Axamiyā label, and second, the Axamiyā identity itself came in for a change of definition. Hijacked as it was by the Axamiyā Hindu middle class, it came to be associated more and more with this particular community alone, alienating the other communities from its fold. The result was conflicts between communities. These conflicts, however, did not erupt overnight; neither did the process of the redefinition of identities¹ unfold in one decisive stroke. Daniel Bell states that, ‘In colonial countries or empires, an open system of overt domination kept most of the indigenous peoples subjected . . . But with the destruction of imperialist rule in former colonial countries . . . competition between the plural groups today has become the norm’ (1996: 139). The same narrative has played out in Assam as well.

There is no doubt that plural groups – distinct from each other in ways ethnic, religious and/or geographical – coexisted here for centuries after they migrated to the land. The syncretism resultant upon their coexistence had given rise to the Axamiyā identity. However, when opposition to colonial rule began and the possibility of grasping political power under a new, ‘post’-colonial dispensation surfaced, coexistence gave way to competition. With one particular community assuming sole ownership of the Axamiyā label, and hence the right to predominate in ‘post’-colonial Assam, the other component communities also felt the need to reclaim their distinctive place within the new nation-state in the making. The preceding chapter has shown how, since the colonial period, the Axamiyā label has been appropriated by the Axamiyā-speaking Hindu population. They sought to crystallise this ownership at the cost of the other

communities of Assam that had contributed as much to the formation of the Axamiyā identity. The process of reclamation of identity that these other communities adopted as a reaction assumed different meanings, followed different trajectories and adopted different methods. The Bodos and the Koches, for instance, started fashioning new self-definitions as they continued on their path of dissociation with the Axamiyā nation. There were many factors that facilitated or problematised this process of ethnic fragmentation. A close look at them could help one understand better the 'post'-colonial conflict scenario in Assam.

IDENTITY AND COLONIAL ETHNOLOGY

The Bodo community has always maintained its distinctive ethnic identity even while giving of itself freely to the formation of the Axamiyā interethnic identity. It has retained its sense of common historical origin and believes that its ancestors migrated from various parts of the Bod country (or Tibet) in ancient times. The term 'Bodo' then derives from 'Bodo Phisa' or 'Bodo Cha' (children of Bod) (Brahma 2009 [1998]: 13). These children of a common ancient land also have a common folklore and common tales of origin that bind them together as the progeny of Monsing Sing Borai, the first human being who came down from heaven with the help of a golden ladder and gave the Bodo society its traditions, customs and structure (ibid.: 27).

The existence, since colonial times, of a major body of scholarship surrounding the community has no doubt helped preserve its collective memory. Much of this scholarship, of course, was the product of colonial ethnology, which has been described by Gary Wilder as: 'a scientific-administrative complex through which practical science and scientific administration constituted one another, whether deliberately or despite actors' self-understanding' (2003: 219).

It was a discipline that 'owed much to the colonial institutionalization of science and statistics' and developed around the 1930s when the 'practical development of ... colonial intelligence more and more relied on the ethnographic typification of contemporary statistics and its scientific inscription as ethnology' (Pels and Saleminck 1999: 85). Another aspect of colonial ethnography which predates this development in the 1930s was that it marked 'the coming of age of colonial

practices that tried to mediate between the “politics of difference” of orientalism’ (van der Veer 1993: 23) and the practice of ‘anglicizing’ Indians to become Christians and citizens (ibid.: 84).

Therefore, there were missionaries who turned ethnographers, case in point being Sidney Endle – his work among the Bodos has already been discussed. Administrators such as W. W. Hunter and B. H. Hodgson also delved into the discipline. The result was that the Bodos had a ready-made body of colonial knowledge to turn to when they launched a conscious movement for a distinctive ethnic identity formation, independent of the Axamiyā identity.

Thomas R. Trautmann (1997: 2) has shown how modern philology developed in the colonial period contributed to the growth of the new ethnology. Peoples and communities were categorised according to the classification of language. Thus, the Bodo language group of the Tibeto-Burman family emerged as a distinctive group of people comprising the Koch, Rabha, Garo, Mech-Kachari, Sonowal-Kachari, Dimasa-Kachari, Bodo-Kachari, Lalung (Tiwa), and Tripuri. The Bodos this book deals with are the Bodo-Kacharis that colonial ethnologist and philologist Endle wrote extensively about. In the initial years of the political mobilisation of the tribals in Assam, the Bodos aligned themselves with the entire indigenous population of the state to form the Tribal League in 1933. Many of the front-ranking leaders of the League were drawn from the Bodo community, which witnessed the growth of a middle class among its ranks earlier than most of the other tribal communities. At this stage, the activities of the League were mostly confined to submitting memoranda to the government and entering into agreements with the ruling party for safeguarding tribal rights and political and other reservations, procuring more grants for tribal development and education, and ensuring the settlement of landless tribals on vacant land. The League was dissolved following the formation of the ‘post’-colonial state of Assam. But when the need for another political platform for demanding tribal rights was felt, the Bodos once again played an active part in the formation of a new political party, the Plains Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA), in 1967. As is obvious from the nomenclature, the PTCA was a party that also did not as yet see the political interests of the Bodos as independent of the other plains tribes of Assam.² Many of these tribes, as per the colonial ethnographic categorisation, belonged to the same Tibeto-Burman ethnic stock as the Bodos. The political climate of the 1980s, however, changed this perception, and the Bodos began

demanding exclusive rights and privileges.³ By the 1980s, the Bodo-Kacharis had also renounced the Kachari appellation; the community now came to be known only as the Bodos. A booklet issued by the ABSU, which has lent the community a strong political voice since its formation, throws some light upon the community's dislike for the term Kachari, which had taken on derogatory connotations in the popular imagination. Speaking of the 'Assamese community', the booklet says: 'They hate the Bodos telling as [sic] Kacharis, Mising – a tribal and the like' (ABSU 1987a).

Another significant contribution of colonial ethnology was the preservation of the 'tribal' languages. Christian missionaries such as Endle invested the Bodos with a sense of a distinct identity by devising for them a written Roman script and by standardising their grammar where they had none. Indeed, the issue of a script for the language has been one of the burning problems facing the community in its search for a stable ethnic identity, and has often led to violence. In the course of the changes in its self-definition, the community has adopted different scripts at different points in its political history. A modified Axamiyā script was in extensive use till the rise of militant nationalism among the Bodos. Many scholars of the language still prefer this script for ease of writing and expression (field interviews). However, during the Bodo Script Movement in 1975, when there was a face-off between the Axamiyā and the Roman scripts for the Bodo language, the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suggested the introduction of the Devanagiri script as a compromise. In 1993, the Bodos were assured that their language would be considered for inclusion in the Eighth Schedule, but only in the Devanagiri script. Currently, the Devanagiri script has been officially accepted. Meanwhile, the preference for the Roman script given to the language by the missionaries is still favoured by a large section of the Christianised Bodos, especially in eastern BTAD.

DISENGAGING FROM INTERETHNIC IDENTITY: THE PROBLEMS

Unlike the Bodos, the Koch-Rajbangsis were seen as much too Hinduised to be either converted to Christianity by the missionaries or to be endowed with any sense of distinction under colonial administrative measures. Colonial administrators initially included

them under the label of 'semi-Hinduised aboriginals' (Hunter 1982 [1879]). But Chapter VI on the 'Castes and Tribes of Assam' in the report of the Census of Assam, 1881 listed the Koch-Rajbangsis as 'wholly converted' (Singh, Singh and Gokhale 1992). Some colonial historians have also remarked on the impossibility of categorising the community. For Gait, the term 'Koch' was a 'term of some ambiguity ... the ethnic character of the people so called has been a matter of some controversy' (2001 [1905]: 47). Earlier historians such as John Peter Wade (1972 [1800]), however, had accepted the very strongly entrenched pre-colonial historiography of the Koches without comment. This historiography, in fact, created much of the problems faced by the Koch community in the process of disengaging from the Axamiyā identity in the 'post'-colonial period.

Pre-colonial Historiography and Detribalisation

The Koch-Rajbangsi people had a very strong presence in pre-colonial Assam. The Kamata kingdom ruled by the Koch kings was, after all, spread over many parts of Assam and Bengal, and the power of the Koch kings at the height of their glory could easily match that of the mighty Ahoms. In order to legitimise their rule over the land, however, both the Ahom and the Koch kings had to resort to converting to Hinduism. Aryan Hinduism had grown roots in Assam and had established itself as the predominant religion by the medieval and early-modern periods. The indigenous autochthons who converted to Hinduism were accepted into the society but relegated to the lower classes. The non-Aryan Koch kings, therefore, took great pains to propound a theory of Aryan origin for their community, whereby they claimed to be descendants of the Kshatriyas who comprised the warrior class of Vedic Hinduism. In this mythical version of their origin, they had had to resort to mating with the Kachari or Mech people while living in hiding from a vengeful Hindu deity. For the kings themselves, they fashioned a tale of divine origin whereby one of the Kshatriyas in hiding, Bisu, was said to have been a love-child of the Hindu god Shiva. The same Bisu went on to assume the name of Viswa Singha and become the founder of the Koch dynasty. An official 'history' of the dynasty was commissioned to be written along these lines in the late 18th or early 19th century (N. C. Sarma 1973:10).

By virtue of this historiography, the Koches not only dissociated themselves from their Kachari or Bodo origin, but also established themselves irrevocably as part of the larger Hindu society. In fact, the term Rajbangsi that came to be associated with the community was an assumed identity that aligned the Koches at large with the royal lineage and its Aryan Hindu origins. As Hunter notes, though, the entire community *en masse* could not attain the social respectability afforded by such alignment:

Different classes necessarily vary in social status, some holding a rank equal with the Kayasthas and Kalitas,⁴ while others are classed among the degraded low castes. Those Rajbangsis who follow menial occupations, such as tending pigs, bearing palanquins, etc., are called by their aboriginal race-name of Koch. (1998 [1879]: 42)

In this way, the Koch-Rajbangsis gradually infiltrated⁵ the Hindu society at various levels and in different capacities, getting totally subsumed by it. Efforts at reclaiming a distinctive identity thus became that much more difficult.

Under the 'post'-colonial protective discrimination system, the Koch-Rajbangsis have been recognised as one of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The OBCs are notified by the National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) on the basis of certain social, educational and economic parameters that are determined from time to time.⁶ Based on their level of Hinduisation and detribalisation, on the one hand, and social backwardness on the other, suggestions have also been made to include the Koch-Rajbangsis in the list of Scheduled Castes (SC) in Assam (Prabhakara 1983a). The Constitution of India defines scheduled communities as those suffering from extreme social and economic backwardness (Ministry of Law and Justice 2007: 7). Scheduling the community as a caste would definitely uphold the observations of colonial historians such as Gait, who noted: 'In Assam proper it [Koch] has become the name of a Hindu caste, into which are received the converts to Hinduism from the ranks of the Kachari, Lalung, Mikir and other tribes' (2001 [1905]: 45).

As for the Koch-Rajbangsis themselves, they have been demanding inclusion in the ST list. To that effect, there have been several instances of individuals from the community 'filing affidavits renouncing their caste Hindu names and reverting to tribal surnames', an effort at

securing 'the restoration of what is believed to be an ancient tribal status' (Prabhakara 1983a). Their efforts at retribalisation, however, have hit quite a few roadblocks, not the least of which is the fact that Koch itself is considered a generic identity. According to a section of scholars, including Gait as quoted earlier (in Gait 2001 [1905]: 45), Koches are not just converts from one original ethnic group to Hinduism, but include all sections of the 'tribal' society of Assam who converted to Hinduism. The question that naturally arises, then, is: 'Which ethnic origin will the community revert to?' Besides, given the nature and extent of their assimilation and adoption into the Hindu society, it is questionable how far such a reversal is possible.

In the case study area, where the Bodos and the Koches live side by side, the difference between the success of the Bodo ethnic revival and the predicament of a Koch reversal to 'tribalism' is quite evident (field observations). Indeed, inhabitants of Koch villages whom I interviewed in Kokrajhar district openly admitted that such efforts at 'tribal' revivalism are exercises in futility and merely 'political' manoeuvres. They also claimed that in western Assam, the Koch-Rajbangsi have retained some traces of their original language and culture. As an example of this, they pointed out that the Rajbangsi men and women in these areas still wear their traditional dresses – the *pātāni* for the women and the *āngsā* for the men. In the eastern districts, however, most Koch-Rajbangsi women have either taken to wearing the Axamiyā *mekhalā-sādor*, or they have, like the men in general, adopted Indian dresses and Western attires. These members of their community have gone further in the path of assimilation and have no collective memory of their indigenous origins which can be used to reconstruct a distinct identity (field interviews).

Divided Communities

The reasons for such differences between the Koch-Rajbangsi people of the western and eastern districts of the field area are not hard to find. The Kamata kingdom of the Koch kings at the height of its power was centred in Cooch Behar, which is currently a district in northern West Bengal, and which formerly comprised an important part of north Bengal. It was the nerve centre of Koch politics, culture and literature. Even when the kingdom began to disintegrate, Cooch Behar remained the symbol of the glorious Koch history. Western Assam

being adjacent to Cooch Behar and merely separated by the state boundaries of Assam and West Bengal, Koch ethnic consciousness remained alive in this area. News and influences of any political or ethnic upheaval in Cooch Behar easily travelled to western Assam.

Moreover, in the western districts, the remnants of the Koch royal dynasty had scattered to rule over smaller kingdoms that grew up in the Eastern Duars (in Sidli, Bijni, and so on) as petty rulers and zamindars. In the process, they had kept the memory of the glorious Koch past alive (cf. Choudhury 2007). Further east, as one moved into the heart of Assam, however, the Koch power waned. It is true that there was a lot of Koch influence in the region – the Koch Hajo kingdom was created not far from Guwahati to appease a rebellious Koch prince; the Kamakhya temple in the heart of Guwahati and at the centre of Axamiyā faith and belief was patronised by the great Koch king Naranarayan and his able general Chilarai; and Chilarai, in fact, has been immortalised in the pan-Axamiyā collective memory as a valorous warrior and national icon. But it is equally true that, at the same time, the eastern districts of the BTAD were often under the influence of the Ahoms. The frequently fluctuating political and socio-cultural history of these areas did not allow for any one particular influence to take precedence over another. The erstwhile districts of Darrang and Kamrup, parts of which fall under the eastern districts of the BTAD now, were thus more characteristic of Axamiyā inter-ethnicity than any other part of Assam. The Koches of these districts, therefore, were further advanced in transforming their ethnic identities than those of the western districts.

But this is not the only instance of differences within the community. There is another dimension to it and that concerns the Koch-Rajbangsis of north Bengal. Although the Koches of western Assam claim to have retained more of their indigenous identity than their eastern brethren, the Koches of north Bengal have been politically more conscious about preserving their ‘ethnic, linguistic, historical, cultural and social distinction’ (KPP 1997). Though nominal, Cooch Behar had retained the status of a princely state under the British rule since 1773. In 1948, it joined the Indian Union, and in 1950, it was made a district of West Bengal. There has been an unbroken political resistance among certain sections of the Koch-Rajbangsis in north Bengal against the reduction of the ancient Koch kingdom to a district – one of the smaller administrative units – in ‘post’-colonial India. The

Hit Sadhini Sabha was formed as early as in 1950 to demand statehood for Cooch Behar under the Indian Union. Many other political and professedly non-political organisations championing a distinctive Rajbangsi identity have also been formed from time to time, culminating in the creation of the KPP, a civil-society organisation, and the KLO, an armed militant group, in the 1990s. The various demands that the KPP has placed before the Indian and West Bengal governments since its inception have concentrated on securing the rights of the Koch-Rajbangsi people of north Bengal. In these demands, the Rajbangsis of the adjoining areas 'in India', presumably Assam, have only found passing mention (KPP 1997).

In some of the literature emanating from Assam and relating to the Koch-Rajbangsi identity, there are distinct undertones of resentment against the fact that the ancient Koch-Kamata kingdom should have been yoked to West Bengal in 'post'-colonial India. In a speech made by a Cooch Behar politician in 2004, reference was made to Koch king Naranarayan as 'our king', as opposed to the Ahom monarchs who were 'their kings', 'their' here standing for the Koches of Assam. Reacting to this speech, a writer questioned: 'What if we said: Give Us Back our Cooch Behar?' (Dutta 2004). Such a perception springs from the fact that the Kamata kingdom was closely related to the glory of ancient Kamrup, Kamrup-Kamata being one of the variants of the name of this ancient empire. Besides, Cooch Behar was also where Xankardeb, the Axamiyā spiritual leader, spent some of the most productive years of his life. Under threat of persecution by the Ahom monarch of his time, Xankardeb was given shelter by King Naranarayan in Cooch Behar, where he built up one of the most revered *xattras*, or religious centres, of the Axamiyā Vaishnavs – the Madhupur *xattrā*.

This feeling of affinity with Assam had led to a large section of the Koch-Rajbangsi leadership to protest against a proposal put forward by the State Reorganisation Committee (SRC)⁷ constituted by the Government of India in 1953 to include Goalpara district in West Bengal. There was much opposition raised from within and outside the Koch-Rajbangsi community against a section of the Bengali settlers in Assam at the time who claimed that Rajbangsi was merely a dialect of Bengali. Instead, the language was established as originating from the same roots as Axamiyā, thus influencing the linguistic

rearrangement of state boundaries in favour of the Goalpara district remaining with Assam (Kakoti 2004).

For all practical purposes then, the Koch-Rajbangsis of north Bengal perceive the Koches of Assam to be Axamiyā, and until recent decades, their struggle for a distinctive identity and separate administrative unit for their community did not wholly embrace the Axamiyā Koches. The Koch-Rajbangsis of Assam have indeed assimilated much more into the 'mainstream'. In matters of political empowerment also, there has not been much scope for complaint, with two of 'post'-colonial Assam's chief ministers, Sarat Chandra Singha and Bishnu Ram Medhi, being drawn from among the community. Thus, for a long time, there seemed to be little cause for the community to fight for their distinctive political or ethnic rights here. In recent decades, however, the situation has changed drastically.

On the path to reclaiming their remembered/reconstructed identities, the Koch community has seen a lot of fissures and fragmentations thus surface within the community itself. Such fissures have not been entirely absent in the case of the Bodos either. Just as there are differences between the eastern and western Koches, the Bodos of western Assam too have many differences in terms of culture, language and politics with their eastern brethren. Field observations showed that the *dakhanā*, the dress that Bodo women wear, is worn differently in western and eastern Assam. The language also has differences in inflection and vocabulary. But the most important division within the community perhaps has been introduced by religion.

Christian missionaries had entered the Northeast during the early years of the British occupation and started spreading their activities in the Brahmaputra valley among the indigenous communities. The Kachari Mission, with its headquarters in Darrang district, played an important role in converting a large section of the Bodos to Christianity. This Mission, along with the Guwahati Mission set up in the 1950s (Neog 1983: 61), no doubt contributed to the spread of Christianity in the eastern districts of the BTAD. Simultaneous with the spread of Christianity, an English-educated middle class also gradually grew.

Meanwhile, in the western districts adjacent to West Bengal, Brahmaism was to have an overwhelming presence beginning in the second decade of the 20th century. Brahmaism preached Vedic tenets that disallowed idolatry and frowned upon consumption of alcohol,

meat and fish. It also brought to the Bodos a message of social change and cultural renaissance propounded by their new guru, Kalicharan Brahma. 'The movement witnessed a remarkable spread of education among the Bodos and rise of a middle class. It demanded reservation of jobs in the government for tribals. It strengthened the foundation of Bodo identity and socio-political consciousness' (B. Singh 2002: 94).

The Bodo population of this region thus remained by and large uninfluenced by Christianity, and was more drawn towards the Hindu ideology that had contributed to their religious reformation.⁸ This religious distinction between the Bodos of eastern and western BTAD has not remained a benign phenomenon, quite unlike the cultural differences within the Koch community. The difference in the latter case is noticeable, but has not noticeably been brought to the forefront of political activity/activism. In the case of the Bodos, however, it has translated into political differences and often taken a violent turn.

Violent Fissures

The political fallout of the Brahma–Christian divide within the Bodo identity has seen the BTAD administration centred in the westernmost district of Kokrajhar turn a blind eye to numerous cases of church-burning in the area since the time it took charge of the BTC. On 3 November 2010, the forest department of the Haltugaon Forest Division of Kokrajhar district undertook a drive to evict the illegal settlements of the Adivasi people in the Longchung forest area, but in the process, burnt down the houses of 1,500 families, besides destroying their schools and places of worship (*Assam Tribune* 2010b). Reports that two churches were destroyed during the eviction have kicked up much dust and elicited widespread condemnation – despite the fact that three temples were also razed – because the BTC authorities have been known to be inimical both to Adivasi settlements and to the spread of Christianity in the area. In 2006, after the new council took charge of the BTAD, reports of Christian Bodo families being attacked in Kokrajhar district had also surfaced (J. Chaterjee 2006).

A more insidious fallout of the Christian–Brahma divide within the community has been the fratricidal wars between two of the most powerful insurgent groups that claim to represent the Bodo community: the NDFB and the BLT. Besides the political and ideological divides between the two insurgent groups which has been discussed

earlier, another important cause of friction between them has been the religious difference. Elsewhere in the Northeast, ‘religious distinctiveness, when co-terminus with ethnicity, [has] exacerbated the sense of otherness’ among communities (Bhaumik 2009: 46). In the case of the Bodos, it has led to fissures within the community and instigated large-scale fratricidal violence. The predominantly Christian NDFB has traditionally drawn more mass support and cadre strength from the eastern BTAD areas. ‘It supports the Church’s demand for the use of the Roman script for the Bodo language . . . and its guerillas have killed many Bodo intellectuals, cultural icons and writers who oppose the demand’ (ibid.: 50).

The BLT, on the other hand, along with the ABSU and the Bodo Peoples’ Action Committee (BPAC), which led the Bodo Movement, opposed the Roman script and instead adopted the Indian State’s compromise formula of a Devanagiri script. It is not very difficult to read the real intent of the State behind its insistence on the Devanagiri script – on the one hand, it alienates the Bodos from the Axamiyā ‘mainstream’, and on the other, it keeps the rift within the community itself alive. Indeed, it has been a conscious policy of the Indian State to create and keep alive such divisions within communities. Bodo scholars whom I interviewed in the field have admitted that in the constant tussle between the various scripts, the community has lost a lot of precious time that it could have utilised for the enrichment of the Bodo language and literature. It also invested a lot of energy in an issue that only deprived an entire generation of Bodo children of the opportunity to learn their own language in its written form.



NOTES

1. Primordialists believe that ethnic identity, like many other social ties, ‘stems from the “givens”’; that the determinants of an ethnic identity – the ‘congruities of blood, speech, custom and so on’ – have ‘an effable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves’ (Geertz 1996: 41–42). Many criticisms have been raised against such an approach to social identities which consider them ‘*ab origine* and *causa sui*: they have no social cause’ (Eller and Coughlan 1996: 45), but it is not my intention here to go into the intricacies of this debate. Without denying that the

primordialist view may have some grounds to stand upon, I shall nonetheless confine myself to looking at ethnicity from an 'instrumentalist' point of view which treats it 'as a social, political, and cultural resource for different interest- and status-groups' (Hutchinson and Smith 1996:8). Such a view is especially applicable to the study of ethnicity in the postcolonial world.

2. In this initial stage, all political and non-political organisations in which the Bodos predominated – Tribal League, Tribal Sangha, PTCA, United Tribal National Liberation Front (UTNLF), All Assam Tribal Women's Welfare Federation (AATWWF) – claimed to represent the interests of all 'plains tribals'. Even when the ABSU, the most overtly exclusively Bodo organisation, was formed, it claimed to represent the interests of all 'plains tribes'.
3. However, the possibility – on a socio-cultural level – of a common platform for all the ethnic groups belonging to the Bodo family has not been abandoned. At the 44th annual conference of the Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS), or the Bodo Literary Forum, held in Bijni in January–February 2005, former Assam Minister G. C. Langthasa, who belongs to the Dimasa community that has close ethno-cultural, literary and historical ties with the Bodo community, said: 'I am proud today that the Dimasas, the Boros, the Boroks from Tripura and Bangladesh, Boros [Meche] from Nepal have congregated in one platform here, and we talk of coming under the same fold' (*Sentinel* 2005a).
4. Hindu classes higher up in the social hierarchy, but lower than the Brahmins.
5. In discussing ethnic conflicts, Francesco Caselli and Wilbur John Coleman II take an instrumentalist view of ethnic identity formation and explain the rationale behind it as follows: 'Each society is endowed with a set of wealth-creating assets, such as land and mineral resources. There is therefore an incentive for agents to form coalitions to wrest control of these assets from the rest of the population. Once a coalition has won control over the country's riches, however, it faces the task of enforcing the exclusion of non-members. In particular, agents not belonging to the winning coalition will attempt to infiltrate it, so as to participate in the distribution of the spoils' (2006: 1).
6. See the official website of the NCBC, Government of India, <http://www.ncbc.nic.in/html/guideline.htm> (accessed 31 January 2011).
7. The SRC was constituted to look into the reorganisation of the component units of the Indian Union – hitherto formed as a result of 'historical accidents and circumstances' – on a 'more rational basis' (Kakoti 2004: 66).
8. In recent decades, especially because of the presence of a large number of Hindu Bengali settlers in the region, the pan-Indian Hindutva politics

preached by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the rabidly Hindu Shiv Sena has also been making inroads into western Assam. On the scale of ethnic hierarchy, the Bengali Hindus are the dominant community in this area, and it does not surprise one to see that the city walls of Kokrajhar town are plastered with slogans supporting the Shiv Sena and the BJP and various other lesser-known Hindu religious organisations.

Five

State Policy, Ethnicity and Conflict



Hutchinson and Smith have observed: ‘There is no necessary connection between ethnicity and conflict’ (1996: 3). However, more often than not, ethnic politics and State policies create conditions that may be necessary to, sufficient for or enabling of conflicts. The last chapter touched upon how the fissures between and within the ethnic communities in the aftermath of ethnic fragmentation have led to violent conflicts in Assam. This chapter will take a closer look at how State policies encouraged such fragmentation, and in the process created the conditions for ethnic conflicts to develop and escalate in the ‘post’-colonial period. It will also simultaneously trace the morphology of these conflicts.

LANGUAGE

The history of the struggle of the Axamiyā language to regain its rightful place in the Axamiyā national life and colonial politics has already been discussed. It has also been observed how, in the ‘post’-colonial censuses, settler communities like the East Bengali Muslims and Adivasis, as well as sections of the smaller ethnic groups of Assam, began to identify their mother tongue as Axamiyā. As a result, Axamiyā was enumerated as the majority community in Assam in successive censuses. However, after the Assam Movement and the subsequent alienation of almost all settler and indigenous populations, the trend reversed and breakaway linguistic groups emerged as the various communities started withdrawing from the Axamiyā fold. The course that the linguistic movements of the case study communities took is charted in the following section.

Bodo

The new leaders and intellectuals of the Axamiyā community did not take the early attempts by the indigenous communities of Assam to

secure the rights of their respective languages under the 'post'-colonial system of governance as anything serious: 'Certain elements had only pleaded for special protection and facilities for them' (H. N. Barua 1960: 1). The Bodo Sahitya Sabha (BSS) or Bodo Literary Forum was formed in 1952 along the lines of the Asam Sahitya Sabha (ASS) or Assam Literary Forum to act as the guardian of Bodo literature and culture. When the Assam Official Language Act was passed in 1960 to make Axamiyā the sole language of official communication, the BSS turned out to be one of its most vocal opponents. It also raised its voice against the subsequent move by the Assam government in 1972 to make Axamiyā the medium of instruction in institutions of higher education. During the period 1974–75, the BSS led the Bodo Script Movement, which demanded that the Bodo language be written in the Roman script and not in Axamiyā, as the practice had been till then. It was argued that when the language was first given a written form by Sidney Endle in 1884, the Roman script had been used (Narzary 1993).¹ Since its formation, the BSS has been taking the lead in mobilising Bodo society to place various demands before the Assam government. In keeping with these demands, Bodo was introduced as a medium of instruction in primary education in 1963, as medium of secondary education in 1968, and as Associate Official Language in 1985.

Thus far, the political mobilisation was along peaceful lines and the modes of protest democratic. In the aftermath of the Assam Movement, however, a climate of political violence made itself manifest. When the Bodo Movement was launched in 1987, linguistic demands became interlinked with other, politically more volatile ones. Post-1987, the BSS lent its overt support to the mass movement led by the ABSU and the BPAC while tacitly condoning the violence of militant factions such as the ABSU-VF, and later the BLT in its struggle to elevate the Bodo language to one of the languages recognised by the government for use in state legislatures. This came about in 2003 when Bodo was included in the Indian constitution under the Eighth Schedule.

Thus, it has taken a long struggle and a series of political movements and agitations to give the Bodo language a distinctive identity and the dignity that its speakers demanded as its due. Besides, it took a violent decade or two of the prolonged Bodo Movement for it to achieve its final objective. Now there are independent departments of Bodo language and literature in universities, and in fact, a

Kokrajhar campus of the Gauhati University has also been in existence since 1997. However, many problems still remain, and in April 2005 (two years after the signing of the Bodo Accord of 2003) at least 10 Bodo organisations demonstrated in Dispur against the state government's inability to tackle the problems surfacing in Bodo-language teaching in the educational institutions of Assam at all levels (*Dainik Janaxadharan* 2005).

Koch-Rajbangsi

The Koch-Rajbangsi of Assam have also similarly been placing linguistic demands and trying to establish the distinctiveness of their language, but political mobilisation in this direction has not reached the same pitch as that of the Bodos. For instance, many Koch-Rajbangsi writers have raised their voices against the common perceptions that the language of Goalpara is either a mixture of the Axamiyā and Bengali languages or a mere dialect of northern Bengal or western Assam; they claim that it is the original Rajbangsi language (Choudhury 2004: 61). Since the 1960s, the Koch-Rajbangsi of Assam have organised themselves under the banner of the AAKRS and started submitting memoranda to the government on various matters relating to the welfare of the community, including the preservation of its language.

In neighbouring north Bengal, language had always been an issue ever since Cooch Behar was merged with West Bengal. The then West Bengal chief minister, Bidhan Chandra Ray, favoured the merger of Cooch Behar with his state in order to serve certain political ends (D. Das 1973: 547–48). And despite a disparaging attitude among the upper-caste Bengali Hindus towards the Koches (S. Nag 2003), they were encouraged to dilute their distinctive identity to the extent that today, Bengali leaders try to portray them as '*amaderi moto Bangali*', or 'Bengalis like us' (Bhaumik 2009: 27). However, as early as 1949, Amanatulla Ahmed, who was also the president of the Cooch Behar State Praja Congress (later known as Hit Sadhini Sabha), had expressed the opposition of the people of Cooch Behar to being considered 'Bengali' in a letter he wrote, along with a few others to the advisor of the states ministry in New Delhi:

[T]he entire people of Cooch Behar (excluding the microscopic Bengali element) are (sic) against the merger of the state with West Bengal. Cooch Beharis (both Hindus and Muslims) unlike the Bengalis,

have peculiar characteristic [*śid*] of their own. Their spoken language Rajbangshi dialect – having greater affinity with Assamese . . . there grew a natural dislike for Bengalis among the Cooch Beharis. (Quoted in A. J. Das 2009: 64)

In recent decades, the Koch-Rajbangsis have escalated their movement for securing their linguistic rights by demanding that their language be included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian constitution. At one of its mass gatherings organised in 2004, the Koch-Rajbangsi Sanskritik Parishad of Assam passed various resolutions demanding not only that the Rajbangsi language be included in the Eighth Schedule, but also that the All India Radio (AIR) broadcast programmes in the Rajbangsi language (A. J. Das 2009: 60–61). After the coming together of the political associations of north Bengal and Assam since the 1990s to launch the movement for a separate state for the community, the demand for the scheduling of the language has also escalated commensurately.

Though largely a non-violent movement so far, the scope for violent confrontations between the community and those perceived as denying the language its due is ever present. The armed militant organisation KLO, for instance, has proclaimed one of its major objectives to be to address the problems of the community relating to the ‘perceived neglect of Kamatapuri language and identity’ (Prakash 2008: 485). Even with the involvement of civil-society organisations, political protests have sometimes turned violent with the State’s law-enforcement agencies resorting to force against purportedly peaceful protesters. For instance, a rally was held by the AKRSU in Assam’s capital, Dispur, on 23 June 2004 in support of various demands, including separate statehood for the community as well as inclusion of the Rajbangsi language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian constitution. In the course of the protest, police atrocities left 89 people injured while 14 Koch-Rajbangsi activists were arrested, and cases of women being assaulted and undressed in public were also reported in the media (*Asomiya Pratidin* 2004).

ETHNICITY

Several instrumentalist considerations came into play as ethnic fragmentations began to proliferate in Assam, leaving the Axamiyā inter-ethnic identity the sole preserve of the dominant Axamiyā-speaking

Hindu society. Perhaps the most important among these was the competition for the political rewards being doled out by the newly formed State under the principle of 'protective discrimination'. This system was undoubtedly a remnant of the colonial policy whereby 'preferences and arrangements for distribution of power and benefits according to membership in communal groups were accepted methods for the adjustment of the political balance of communities as well as for the amelioration of the condition of the lowly' (Galanter 1961: 42).

The Indian constitution makes it the duty of the State under the Directive Principles of State Policy to promote the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the society, including the SCs and STs, and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. To this end, reservations were introduced in educational institutions and in matters of public-employment opportunities, and with regard to access to social-welfare schemes for all backward classes. For tribals specifically, permanent residency and land-ownership rights were reserved in order to protect them from the onslaught of non-tribals and other migrants. Various administrative apparatuses exist to ensure the territorial integrity of the tribal-inhabited areas, and these include being categorised as Sixth Schedule areas, drawing of Inner Lines and the requirement for Protected or Restricted Area Permits.² In certain cases, STs are also exempted from income tax. Further, rights to land ownership and exchange,³ and access to other natural resources and traditional communal property as well as to elected offices are restricted in favour of them.

The principle behind the introduction of these special provisions for the ST population was 'integration' as propounded by the anthropologist Verrier Elwin, whose ideas influenced the policy-making process in this direction as initiated by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Integration, as opposed to isolation and assimilation, was seen as a means to 'bring the blessings and advantages of modern medicine, agriculture and education to tribes, without destroying the rare and precious values of tribal life' (Elwin 1959: 53–60). The five principles, or Panchsheel, that Nehru subsequently laid out in his foreword to Elwin's *A Philosophy for NEFA* (1959) aimed at tribal development and integration. They announced that people should develop 'along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them'. In pronouncing this principle, Nehru

had introduced a rhetoric which was to be used in the subsequent decades by most of the newly resurgent ethnic groups in Assam and the Northeast to demand various provisions under the protective discrimination mechanism for themselves. Therefore, in their search for territorial autonomy and the right to self-determination, Bodo organisations such as the ABSU argued along the same lines:

(The) All Bodo Students' Union strongly urges upon the Union Government of India to create a Separate State with the status of full-fledged [*sic*] statehood which is the only means and way to protect and safeguard the aboriginal downtrodden people particularly [*sic*] the Bodos from systematic machination for political, economic and social exploitation by the anti-tribal rulling [*sic*] Clique of Assam. (Quoted in N. Hazarika 1998: 127)

They demanded this despite the fact that as a community that had maintained its ethnic characteristics, the Bodos had already been included in the list of STs. As a result, they had access to all forms of reservations made for the STs, including those in education and public employment. In the case of the Koch-Rajbangsis of Assam, however, even the demand for an ST status has not seen fruition till date.

The diachronic development of the demand for recognition as a tribal community by the Koch-Rajbangsis is an excellent example of how 'post'-colonial State policies have encouraged the forging of new ethnic identities and the merging or disintegration of old ones. The history of the Koch community has traditionally been one full of attempts to integrate and assimilate with the larger Hindu society. Thus was the conversion to Hinduism effected, and thus was the Rajbangsi appellation adopted. The Koch kings also gave themselves and their community a new historiography that found a place for them in Hindu mythology. There was also a social movement within the community to establish its Kshatriya credentials. The wearing of the sacred thread traditionally worn only by upper-caste Hindus and the adoption of other Brahminical practices were hallmarks of this movement initiated by the Kshatriya Samiti since 1912 (S. D. Hazarika 2002). However, after the system of reservations was introduced, 'designation as ST' came to be seen 'as a passport to educational and public employment opportunities' (Baruah 2007: 49), and subsequently there was a rush among communities to lay claim to 'tribal' credentials. The Koch-Rajbangsis were among them.

Such claims were also encouraged by the lack of specific definitions for categories and communities covered by the protective-discrimination system. Mark Galanter, for instance, has found that in determining the tribal communities to be scheduled, certain arbitrary 'tribal characteristics' have been relied upon, and 'just where the line between "tribals" and "non-tribals" should be drawn has not always been free from doubt' (1984: 150). Under the circumstances, claims and counter-claims of tribalism by communities in conflict can be, and have been, raised from time to time. A case in point is the Koch community's claim to tribalism, which was countered by the Bodos. In 2002, Member of Parliament (MP) Sansuma Khunggur Bwiswmuthiary, a prominent Bodo leader, argued in the lower house of the Parliament: 'There are some advanced communities who are more advanced than the existing tribal people of Assam. If those advanced communities and populous communities are included in the list of Scheduled Tribes, then the original tribal people will be marginalised in a very dangerous way'.⁴

Ironically, efforts – however feeble – had also been made by the Koch-Rajbangsi intellectuals to realign themselves with the Bodos in terms of ethnic origin at the time when the Bodo Movement was at its peak and the Bodos looked set to win the demand for their own homeland. When the proposal for the formation of the BAC was floated in 1993, Koch leaders initially tried to align themselves with the Bodos by extending support to the formation of the autonomous council. AAKRS leader and Koch ideologue Ambika Charon Choudhury declared at an ABSU-BPAC rally in 1992 that 'BAC should be created covering the geographical area comprising entire North Bengal and present Assam for doing justice to all the indigenous peoples due to historical reasons' (2006: 15).

In his earlier representation to the ECOPTA, he had argued:

[C]reation of B.A.C. means deliberate deprivation of legally non-tribal Koch-Rajbonshies and I requested the Three Men Expert[is] Committee & suggest Govt. of India to declare the Koch-Rajbonshies as scheduled Tribe first and then create BAC in the name of Bodos, and declare entire Assam as Tribal State. (Choudhury 2006: 14–15)

He went on to state that the term 'Bodo' was a generic term and included the Koches within its meaning (*ibid.*: 15). In his writings about the ethnic origins of the Koch community, Choudhury rues

that 'arbitrary and whimsical division and sub-divisions of the same stock of peoples have been created under the provisions of Indian constitution' (1993: 69). In his perception:

The meaning of the word Kachari (Kochari) is very clear and grammatical one [sic]. In present day Bodo language (earlier Bodo dialect) belonging to Tibbeti-Burman [sic] language group the word 'Hari' signifies descendants or offsprings. When the 'Koch' is pre-fixed [sic] with 'Hari', we get the word, i.e. 'Kochari' (Koch+Hari). It means the Koches and Kocharis were the same. (Ibid.: 45–46)

However, such efforts did not bear fruit. Sections within the community itself did not subscribe to this view at all. Thus, in their representation to the ECOPTA in 1991:

[T]he Bhartiya Koch-Rajbangshi Kshatriya Mahasabha, Tezpur opined that if the Bodo were to get a separate state the Koch-Rajbangshi also should secure a separate state . . . The Koch-Rajbangshi organisation in other district [sic] has called for a solution of the Bodo-Kachari problem which does not go against the interest of ethnic Koch-Rajbangshi of Assam. They have also demanded that the Koch-Rajbangshi should be declared a scheduled tribe before any solution of the Bodo-Kachari problem is found. (Singh, Singh and Gokhale 1992)

But the demand for the scheduling of the Koch-Rajbangshis has been a battle not yet won in Assam – the community is enlisted as ST in Meghalaya, though. For a brief period, in 1996, an ordinance was passed by the president of India to include it in the list of the STs of Assam (excluding the Autonomous Districts), but soon after in 1997, 'in view of the fact that no new Ordinance has been promulgated and no bill has been passed in this regard' their OBC status was restored and the ST status scrapped.⁵ A commission had been set up under the Assam Backward Classes Commission Act 1993 for examining 'requests for inclusion of any class of citizens as a backward class in the lists and hear complaints of over-inclusion or under-inclusion of any backward class in such lists and tender such advice to the Government as it deems appropriate'.⁶ But given that the very grounds for inclusion/exclusion were not clearly enumerated, a lot of confusion, consternation and outrage followed the short-term inclusion and quick exclusion of the Koches from the ST list. The Koches on their part claimed that

regard being had to the untouchability prevalent and the sufferings they have undergone for the last half a century and the society in which they have been living having realised the turmoil and pathetic condition these people had been undergoing for quite some time, the competent authority in the State recommended the case of this community to the Government of India to declare them as Scheduled Tribe. (Gauhati High Court Judgment 1998)

It is true, of course, that the Koches have traditionally occupied some of the lowest rungs of caste Hindu society and have been at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy. Field interviews have revealed that both Bodo and Koch-Rajbangsi people have been nearly equally treated as outcastes by upper-caste Hindu Axamiyā people, and this despite the fact that the Koches renounced the food and drinking habits denounced by orthodox Hinduism. The efforts of the community to align itself with the upper echelons of Hindu society by reconstructing and reinterpreting Hindu mythology have already been discussed. What is interesting is that the leaders and intellectuals of the Bodo community have also, at times, used Hindu mythology and ancient Indian history to reinterpret the origins and ancient glory of their community:

It is an interesting fact to note that the Meches or Bodos were intimately known to the people of the Vedic, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata age. The Meches or Bodos had even participated in the great battle of Kuruksetra and showed their valour, but to the present day civilised people of India the Bodos are not known. (Narjinary 2000: 4)

However, unlike the Koches, the Bodos' efforts were not aimed at aligning themselves with the Axamiyā Hindu society or seeking its acceptance. A project adopted mainly after the outbreak of Bodo–Axamiyā hostility, the Bodo community aimed at forging a connection with mainland Aryan India, independent of the Axamiyā connection: 'When the caste Hindu Assamese ethnicity was not born, the Bodos were having their kingdom throughout the length and breadth of modern Assam' (ibid.: 5).

The reasons were two-fold: political, because the Bodos were aiming at achieving separate statehood, something that only the central Indian government could grant at the cost of Assam and the dominant Axamiyā section; and social, because for long, the Axamiyā Hindus had treated the Bodos with disdain. Except for a few staunch Brahmas,

the Bodos did not, by and large, renounce pork and alcohol, and were thus not allowed into Hindu households. Even when they were, they had separate utensils earmarked for them and were forced to wash these after eating. Most lower classes among the Koches were also treated in a similar manner (field interviews).

Despite such parallels in their social statuses, however, the 'tribal' credentials of the Bodos have never been in doubt, whereas the Koches have at best been considered candidates for an SC status. Jayanta Rongpi, an MP who belongs to the Karbi ST, also criticised the Koch community's demand for scheduling as a tribe in the Indian Parliament, and questioned: 'If they are recognised as a Scheduled Caste in West Bengal, how can they be recognised as a Scheduled Tribe in Assam?'⁷

However, as I have pointed out, members of the community are not so keen to retain their caste Hindu status any more and to this end, are adopting tribal surnames. One of the reasons is that other than the privileges mentioned earlier, the preference for an ST status in the context of the Northeast also has a territorial dimension to it.

LAND, LIVELIHOOD, HOMELAND

The colonisers implemented administrative boundaries that segregated the peoples of the hills from those of the plains in Assam. These boundaries pushed the hill tribes behind Inner Lines, and restricted them to 'excluded' or 'partially excluded' or 'backward' tracts over the years. In effect, these people came to be known as the 'backward' or 'excluded' communities depending on the nomenclature of the administrative areas they inhabited. The 'post'-colonial Indian State's policies towards these regions and peoples were also in keeping with these labels and the nature of the 'tribes' these labels implied. Many of the colonial administrative provisions devised for these communities, as has already been mentioned, were retained in 'post'-colonial India. New ones were also devised, but many were also in continuation of the colonial legacy. These various provisions fed into a feeling of territorial exclusivity, and in the process, led not only to settler-indigenous conflicts but also to widespread ethnic violence among the autochthonous communities. It also spawned a series of 'homeland' demands that have taken on the nature of militant nativism in recent decades. Insurgency has been a fallout of this.

Inner Line

When the Indian constitution was being drawn up, the Gopinath Bordoloi Subcommittee on North East Frontier (Assam Tribal and Excluded Areas) of the Constituent Assembly recommended the retention of the Inner Line system in the hill areas, noting that a lot of importance was attached to it by the hill people who viewed it ‘as protective measure although such measures had preserved them as “anthropological specimens”’ (Chaube 1999 [1973]: 102). In the subsequent decades, when ethnic revivalism and politics began to gain in strength all over the Northeast, this system – like all other similar measures of protective discrimination – came to be fetishised by almost all ethnic groups as a cure for economic and demographic swamping by migrants, political marginalisation by dominant migrant and autochthonous communities as well as all identity-related issues. Currently in place in three of the hill states of the Northeast (Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland), there are increasing demands among the other states of the region for its extension to these states, including Assam. The ones that already have the provision in place fear its removal. The Mizos or Lushais are the most numerous community in Mizoram, and the most dominant. After a long-drawn-out insurgency movement against the perceived domination of the Axamiyā Hindu society, the Mizos were successful in charting out the separate state of Mizoram in 1987 from the erstwhile Lushai Hills area of Assam. And yet today, the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), the largest students’ body in Mizoram, is willing for the Mizo language to remain unlisted in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution if it means keeping the Inner Line alive: ‘If our language is included in the 8th schedule, we would be regarded as one of the major tribes of India. In that case, there is a danger of the Centre removing the inner line protection and other reservations’ (*Newslink* 2006).

Such sentiments abound because the Inner Line is seen as a potent weapon against uncontrolled migration – it requires an official Inner Line Permit (ILP) to be issued to visitors in places bound by the Lines. The system also enshrines protection against settlement and ownership of land by migrants. A 2008 verdict by the Gauhati High Court to allow non-domicile Indians to settle in the three states covered by the Inner Line system created large-scale protests from both civil-society organisations as well as from state governments and peoples’ representatives (IANS 2008).

The demand for the implementation of the system in other states of the Northeast has been increasing. In Assam, the AASU has been vehemently fighting against illegal population influx and settlement from Bangladesh, and in the process demanding, among other things – such as a special constitutional status for Assam – that the Inner Line system be implemented. The argument is that the system is a safeguard against illegal migrants who were ‘changing the demographic pattern here and were a threat to the nation and the survival of the indigenous people of the state’ (Zee News 2009).

Such overwhelming faith in the Inner Line system is ironic considering that in practice, the system is quite ineffectual. The only thing it has been effective at is in creating an insider–outsider divide – or the citizen–denizen constellations, as one scholar puts it (cf. Baruah 2003) – leading to a majority of the conflicts in Assam and the Northeast. In other words, the system has only managed in making the lines of exclusion and inclusion between communities more volatile and conflict-inducing.

In practical terms, in the three states where it is in place, illegal migration has been taking place continuously, and migrants have also been taking advantage of loopholes in the system to settle and own land and property beyond the Lines. ‘Since the protective discrimination regime in place restricts what denizens can legally do, numerous informal arrangements have emerged in the ownership and control of agricultural land and in business practices’ (Baruah 2003: 54). Marriage to indigenous spouses and ownership by proxy are some of these arrangements.

The limitations and the corruption of the system notwithstanding, in the absence of any other safeguard against illegal immigration and perceived threats to identity and livelihood, representatives of the Axamiyā community continue to demand that Inner Lines be implemented in Assam. In fact, the most prominent regional political party of Assam, the AGP, which was formed with the active support and ideological backing of the AASU, traces its origin to certain ‘long term and short term objectives’ of the ‘Assamese community’ which ‘on the basis of their [*sid*] own manpower with their political, economic and cultural attitude had tried to establish a homeland in the form of a state in India’. One of these objectives was ‘to implement inner-line permit system in Assam’.⁸

Tribal Belts and Blocks

While the dominant section of the Axamiyā community had few provisions to safeguard their identity, livelihood and resources from settler populations, and thus turned to demanding special constitutional safeguards and the Inner Line system, there were other special provisions laid down for the indigenous autochthons of Assam. Of these, the Tribal Belts and Blocks were the most important. However, just as the Line System on which they were based had proved to be a defunct system, soon after their implementation, the Tribal Belts and Blocks also turned out to be little more than token in nature.

Chapter 10 of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation Act, 1886 was amended in 1947 to create 35 'belts and blocks' in areas predominantly peopled by certain 'protected classes'. Nearly 18 tribal belts and blocks were created in the erstwhile Goalpara (including the present case study district of Kokrajhar and parts of Chirang), Kamrup (including parts of the present case study districts of Baska and Chirang) and Darrang (including the present case study district of Udalguri and parts of Baska) districts.⁹ Subsequently, in 1977, 10 more belts and blocks were created, of which the Santhal Colony tribal block, the Ripu tribal belt, the Dotoma tribal belt, and the Hatigaon tribal block were in Kokrajhar subdivision (covering the extent of the present-day Kokrajhar district).

Within these belts and block (it was stipulated in the above-mentioned act), transfer, exchange, lease, agreement or settlement with respect to land ownership in these areas could take place only between people of certain classes 'notified' under the Act. In 1949, a state-government notification declared (i) plains tribals (which included the Bodos) (ii) hills tribals (iii) tea-garden tribals (iv) Santhals (v) Nepali cultivator graziers, and (vi) scheduled castes as the classes of people to be protected under the provision for Tribal Belts and Blocks. In 1985, the Koch-Rajbangsis were added as another 'protected class' under the system.

However, the provisions had many problems and loopholes, and as with most other instruments of protective discrimination, seemed to survive more in breach than in observance. As in the case of land beyond the Inner Lines, land in the Tribal Belts and Blocks also continued to be bought and sold by non-protected classes of people, so that cases of tribal land alienation increased. In 1999, a

report on tribal land alienation prepared by the Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Tribes found that among the modes of land alienation caused by private individuals and financial institutions, such as banks,

it is found that 'Sale' constitutes the highest percentage. Out of 198.41 Acres of alienated land 120.02 Acres or 60.49 percent are [sic] transferred through sale. 2.83 Acres or 1.42 percent of alienated land account for the forcible occupation by money lenders. 29.26 percent of the alienated land or 58.07 Acres are found to be alienated through mortgage. (B. N. Bordoloi 1999: 48)

Monetary need despite land ownership, indebtedness and widespread ignorance about the prevalence of laws against land sale and transfer were cited as some of the reasons behind such alienation by the report. Often, such sales would be to the disadvantage of the tribal land-owner – the report noted that in one instance, nine families in Rajadabari village in the Gossaigaon subdivision of Kokrajhar had sold a total of 15.77 acres of land to settlers, of which a particular stretch of 1.40 acres was bought for a sum as paltry as ₹1,000 (ibid.: 89).

As compared to this, 17.50 acres or 8.82 percent of the total land area was reported alienated due to acquisition for public purposes, 'specially for irrigational canal, embankment, erection of Electricity Towers, construction of school buildings, etc.' (B. N. Bordoloi 1999: 48). However, if this percentage seems quite low, it should be viewed against the background of the de-notification of tribal areas by the state government, which has been done from time to time, and which has been a major political issue raised by tribal leaders. In 1969, for instance, the Assam government de-constituted a sizeable area of the South Kamrup (Guwahati) tribal belt by a notification, to facilitate the construction of the capital township of Dispur. This power of the state government to exclude areas from the Tribal Belts and Blocks has been seen as a threat by the protected classes.

Leaders of the Bodo community, particularly, have been raising various contentions against the provisions under the system of Tribal Belts and Blocks. In 1967, in a memorandum submitted to the president of India, the PTCA had stated:

[N]owhere in the relevant provisions of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation the word "Tribal" is used though the Belts and Blocks

constituted under these provisions are called Tribal Belts and Blocks. Of course, the principle followed in constituting these Belts and Blocks was that the majority of the population in these areas must be tribals. (PTCA 1967)

The inclusion of non-tribal communities, such as the Koch and Nepali communities as well as certain SCs, under the ambit of these belts and blocks was also criticised.

In recent decades, a large number of political mobilisations against the Assam government and the Axamiyā ‘mainstream’ have rallied around the administrative failure to implement and maintain the boundaries and limitations set by the Tribal Belts and Blocks. As Bodo leader Aditya Khaklari, general secretary of the All Assam Tribal Sangha, an apex body of the tribal organisations of Assam, cautioned in this context: ‘We must keep in mind that alienation of the tribal people from their land was one of the root causes of the various tribal upsurges in Assam’ (Talukdar 2007).

The same failure has also been used by the ABSU as the basis for its demand for a separate state of Bodoland since 1987:

Now, only on account that the earlier as well as present Governments failed to protect the tribal areas and if they fail to free the tribal areas from encroachers, tribals are entitled to get a Separate State. Non-tribal encroachers such as non-indigenous people have formed majority in tribal areas and oppressed the tribal people and thus interests of tribals are not protected. As such for the protection of the interests of tribals, ethnic identity of Bodos, they are entitled to get Separate State. (ABSU 1987a)

The boundaries of the Tribal Belts and Blocks were the basis upon which the ABSU had traced the initial cartography of its proposed new state of Bodoland.

Autonomy, Statehood, Sovereignty

Over the course of the long-drawn-out Bodo Movement, it was seen by the movement’s leadership that a separate state would not be granted under the political dispensation of the time. A shift was therefore noticed in the demands raised by the Bodo leadership – autonomy, and not statehood, became the primary demand. In this,

the autonomous districts and regions created for the hill tribes of Assam under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution provided inspiration.

As per the recommendation of the Gopinath Bordoloi Subcommittee on North East Frontier (Assam Tribal and Excluded Areas) of the Constituent Assembly, most of the hill areas of the Northeast that had in the colonial period come under the 'excluded' and 'partially excluded' labels were included in the Sixth Schedule. The Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills (now Dima Hasao) districts in present-day Assam were the only two autonomous areas left within the state after the other original Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) were separated from its territory to create the new states of Mizoram and Meghalaya. The limited nature of the autonomy enshrined in the Sixth Schedule, and 'the attitude of the plains people', had led to the creation of these new states. At a meeting of the chief executive members (CEMs) of all ADCs held in 1954, B. M. Roy, CEM of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills district council (which was to be incorporated into the new state of Meghalaya), demanded

- (1) Formation of a separate Hills State
- (2) Amendment of the Sixth Schedule, which, evidently . . . does not fully satisfy us because it confers no real autonomy. (Quoted in Chaube 1999 [1973]: 122)

During the Constituent Assembly debates over the Sixth Schedule, certain Axamiyā leaders had openly opposed the idea of granting any autonomy to the tribal people as a whole. Rohini Kumar Choudhury, for instance, had announced: 'We want to assimilate the tribal people. We were not given that opportunity so far. The tribal people, however much they liked, had not the opportunity of assimilation' (Constituent Assembly Debates 1949). Questionable as this claim was, Choudhury's subsequent submissions also smack of a 'big brotherly' attitude towards the tribal population:

This autonomous district is a weapon whereby steps are taken to keep the tribal people perpetually away from the non-tribals and the bond of friendship which we expect to come into being after the attainment of independence would be torn asunder. During the British days, *we were not allowed to introduce our culture among those people*. Even after the British have gone, we find the same conditions in the new Constitution of Dr. Ambedkar. (Ibid.; italics mine).

Nevertheless, Gopinath Bordoloi lobbied successfully for the creation of the ADCs for the hill areas, although even he presumed that the tribals of the plains were 'being gradually assimilated to the population of the plains', and hence needed no such protection (Singh, Singh and Gokhale 1992). It was not long before the limited nature of the powers enshrined in the Sixth Schedule began to create discontent among the hill tribes; the breakaway states of Meghalaya and Mizoram carved out of the erstwhile Assam are an example. The creation of the new states for specific hill tribes (Mizoram for the Mizos, for example) also acted as an inspiration for some plains tribes, such as the Bodos. At the peak of the Bodo Movement – one of the bloodiest chapters in the history of 'post'-colonial Assam – a section of the Bodos demanded that Assam be divided 'fifty-fifty', the state boundaries be reorganised and the Bodos be given their own state within the Indian Union.

The ABSU's history of demanding a separate homeland dates back to 1967, the year of its formation, which was also the year when the then prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi, announced the reorganisation of Assam on a federal basis by creating new states out of the existing territory. The PTCA was formed in the same year, through the active participation of the ABSU, to place the demand for a separate homeland for the Bodos. In a memorandum submitted to the government in 1967, a union territory,¹⁰ to be called Udayachal, was demanded for the plains tribals of Assam, one that would subsequently be upgraded to a state (PTCA 1967). This demand was not accommodated and the PTCA dropped it altogether in 1977 when it entered into an alliance with the Janata Dal, the party that formed the Assam government in that year after defeating the Congress party. Instead, Samar Brahma Choudhury, the founder president of PTCA, and Charan Narzary, the party's general-secretary, began advocating an experimental autonomous region. Hardliners then formed the PTCA (Progressive) to continue with the fight for the proposed union territory, which they now named 'Mishing Bodoland'.¹¹ All such demands having met with no success, the ABSU launched the movement to divide Assam 'fifty-fifty' in 1987.

As the movement progressed, however, the demand had to be scaled down to ask for the formation of an autonomous territory. In the Introduction, I have already traced the history of how the BTAD was formed and the Sixth Schedule amended in 2003 to give the autonomous territory a constitutional status. The demand for a separate state, however, has not entirely died down. A Bodo National Convention

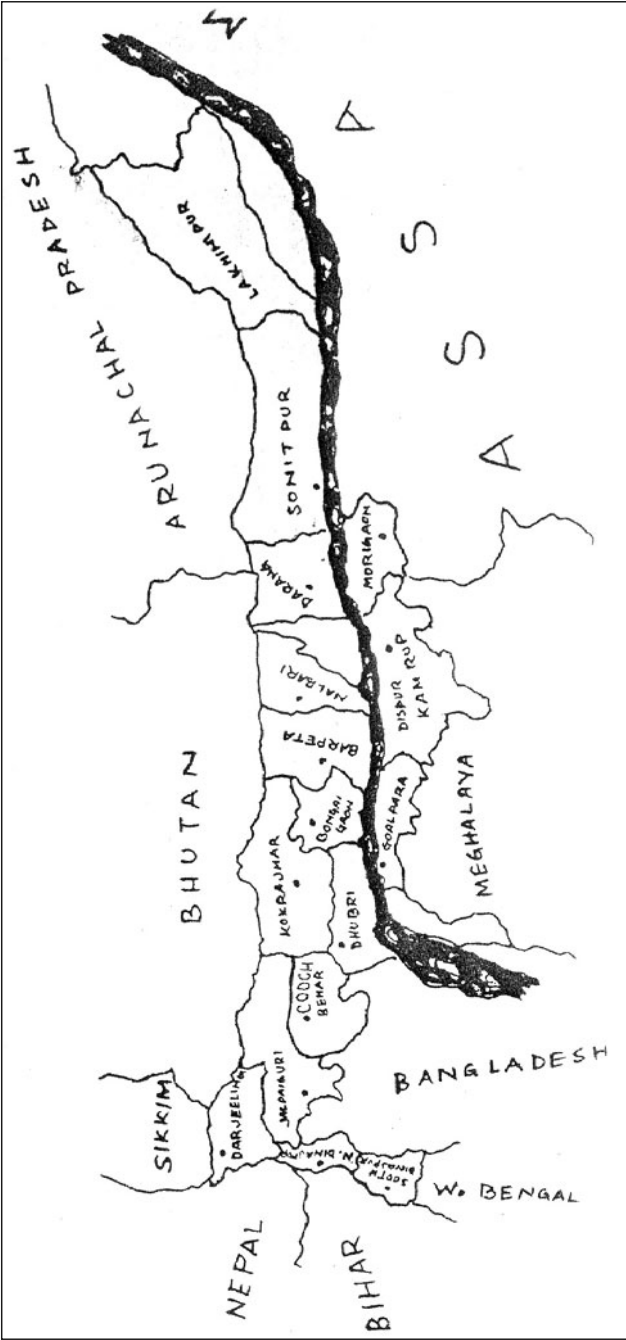
was organised on 18 and 19 November 2010 in Kokrajhar, the BTC headquarters, with the aim to unify the various factions within Bodo society and 'resolve all differences and past mistakes to create a new era of brotherhood' (*Sentinel* 2010). It was decided at the convention that the BTC chief, Hagrama Mahilary, will lead a representation to the central union government to raise, once again, the demand for a separate state for the Bodos, on the grounds that the Sixth Schedule autonomous council had failed to fulfill the aspirations of the community (*Asomiya Pratidin* 2010b).

Close on the heels of this latest turn in Bodo politics, the Koch-Rajbangsi have also escalated their demand for a separate state of Kamatapur. But the areas that they have asked for inclusion overlap with the map of the Bodo homeland. The political map of Kamatapur as submitted by the AKRSU (see Map 5.1), along with a memorandum, on 13 December 2010 to the Indian prime minister includes parts of north Bengal, and in Assam, portions of the districts of Kokrajhar, Dhubri, north Bongaigaon, Darrang, and Sonitpur up to Lakhimpur, Goalpara and Morigaon, besides Kamrup (*Assam Tribune* 2010c). The stage is set, therefore, for another outbreak of conflict, not just between the Bodos and the Koches, but also between the Koches and the other communities living in all the other areas proposed to be included in the new state.

The Koch-Rajbangsi demand for Kamatapur has been gaining ground in Assam only in the recent decades. In neighbouring Cooch Behar, however, the idea of a separate state has been in currency since 1940, even before the merger of the former princely state with the Indian Union. The elites among the community referred to the Bengali caste Hindu community as 'Vinnajati', or 'the other community', and maintained a distance from it in terms of social behaviour and interaction. Koch-Rajbangsi leaders, among them Jogendranath Mondal, advocated the creation of a separate state called 'Rajar-sthan' (or 'abode of kings') for the Rajbangsis in order to counter their backwardness and fight their domination by upper-caste Hindu Bengalis on the one hand and by Muslims¹² on the other (S. D. Hazarika 2002).

In 'post'-colonial India, the Uttar Khanda Dal (UKD) floated the idea of a separate homeland for Koch-Rajbangsis in North Bengal in 1969. The Kamatapur Gana Parishad revived the demand next in 1987, but in recent times, the movement has started

Map 5.1: Proposed Map of Kamatapur State



Source: A. J. Das (2009: xiii); original map as submitted by AKRSU.

gathering momentum since 1997, after the KPP intensified the demand (A. J. Das 2009: 20–21). Since the 1990s, the various Koch-Rajbangsi political organisations of Assam have also come in contact with those in north Bengal, and the resulting synergy has led to the movement gaining ground.

A large section of the Koch-Rajbangsi community of Assam had successfully resisted the inclusion of Goalpara with West Bengal in the 1950s. Not long after, around 1969, the Kamata Rajya Sangram Parisad (KRSP) was formed in Goalpara to demand a separate state of Kamata. Members of the Cooch Behar royal family, such as Kumar Pranabendu Narayan, were among those who were part of this organisation (A. J. Das 2009: 21). Feeble attempts at demanding an autonomous territory in Goalpara were also made by another Rajbangsi organisation, the Goalpara Jila Sayattasashan Got (Choudhury 2004: 12). Neither of these demands, however, gained much momentum at the time and the Koch-Rajbangsi organisations, including the AAKRS, confined themselves to demanding an ST status. Some attempt was also made to get Assam declared a ‘tribal state’ and to align the Koch community with the Bodos to gain a share of the autonomy being granted to the latter in the initial part of the 1990s. But from trying to align themselves with the indigenous communities of Assam, the Koch-Rajbangsi leaders are now looking towards the more powerful organisations of north Bengal to help them achieve their political objectives – something they realise they cannot achieve on their own in a state where they do not even have a distinctive enough identity. Since the Koch-Rajbangsis do not have an ST status in Assam, they cannot even demand an autonomous council under the Sixth Schedule. It is, therefore, in their interest to align themselves with the members of their community in the neighbouring state, where the movement is already quite powerful, both in terms of political mobilisation for a separate state under the Indian Union as well as in the form of an armed militant movement.

The armed militant group KLO has been quite active in recent years, with a little help from other militant groups. But it has not always been very welcoming of the Koch-Rajbangsis of Assam and has been known to have excluded the Koch-Rajbangsi areas of lower Assam from its proposed map of Kamatapur because, as it reasoned, the community has been living cordially with the greater Axamiyā community for ages. The AKRSU has, of course, expressed surprise

and shock at this stance of the KLO and determined to carry on its fight, alongside the other organisations of North Bengal, for the proposed homeland of a united Kamatapur (*North East Tribune* 2004).

INSURGENCY

The stance adopted by the KLO stands explained when one traces the origin of the organisation – it was formed with the help of the ULFA, the leading insurgent group¹³ of Assam. The ULFA actively aided the KLO with respect to arms and training.¹⁴ On its part, formed in 1979, the ULFA's declared goal has been 'to liberate Assam (a land of 78,529 square K.M.), through Armed [*sic*] national liberation struggle from the clutches of the illegal occupation of India and to establish a sovereign Independent Assam'.¹⁵ To this end, it claims to be representing 'the entire independent minded struggling peoples, irrespective of different race-tribe-caste-religion and nationality of Assam' (*ibid.*).¹⁶ Its championship of all 'Axombaxis' (people living in Assam), as opposed to just the section of the people identified as Axamiyā, sets it apart from the other nativist organisations, armed or unarmed. To lay claim to the territory already identified by the ULFA as the proposed sovereign State of Assam or to the people considered part and parcel of Assam by it would definitely put the KLO at odds with its mentor organisation. Besides, the KLO also has close ties with the NDFB; and the ULFA, KLO and NDFB have been known to have formed an umbrella organisation to coordinate their activities.¹⁷ The three organisations, after all, share almost the same turf, with the Bodo-dominated western Assam acting as a conduit for the KLO into the Northeast and beyond, and the Koch-Rajbangsi-dominated Siliguri corridor being a major route of trans-border movement for the NDFB and the ULFA. The KLO and the NDFB were also known to have military camps in Bhutan alongside those of the ULFA till Operation All Clear launched jointly by the Indian Army and the Royal Bhutan Army in 2003 managed to flush them out and end almost all their activities in the neighbouring country.

Just as it has helped the KLO on many fronts, the ULFA has also extended its help and solidarity to the NDFB on many occasions. In fact, the Co-ordination Committee of the NDFB & ULFA was formed in 1998 to launch a united struggle against the common enemy: the Indian State (*Freedom* 1999). The year 1998 was also one in which the

NDFB gave up its earlier name 'Bodo Security Force' (BdSF), under which nomenclature it had been functioning since 1986, and adopted a new constitution. Its stated objectives now were to:

- (i) liberate Bodoland from 'Indian expansionism and occupation';
- (ii) free the Bodo nation from 'colonial exploitation, oppression and domination';
- (iii) establish a 'democratic socialist society' to promote 'liberty, equality and fraternity'; and
- (iv) uphold the 'integrity and sovereignty' of Bodoland.¹⁸

There is an obvious contradiction inherent in an organisation demanding a sovereign State of Assam lending its support to another demanding a sovereign State of Boroland that would include parts of the proposed sovereign Assam. However, in the proposed independent Assam, the ULFA has offered federal powers to all tribes and minorities, and this combined with its pronounced commitment to all 'Axombaxis', has set the stage for 'fraternal relations' between the organisation and those representing other communities, such as the Bodos (Bhaumik 2007: 25).

After nearly three decades of fighting against the Indian State, however, the ULFA's demand for sovereignty was undermined by a section of its own leadership which entered into a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government in 2008 and 'agreed to give up the demand of a sovereign state of Assam and demand for full autonomy within the framework of Indian constitution, through a democratic and non-violent process'.¹⁹ This group, which calls itself ULFA (Pro-Talk), has been mindful of the rights of the various ethnic groups even within the proposed regional autonomy of Assam. Among its other demands is the setting up of an upper house in the Assam legislature which would represent equally all ethnic and indigenous groups, besides the settler communities. The ethnic groups which already have their autonomous councils will continue enjoying their 'territorial, political status and powers', in keeping with their ideal of 'progressive nationalism':

The tendency of denying the status and own characteristics of the small indigenous and ethnic groups by the major races through aggression is

chauvinistic nationalism and opposed to it, adopting a policy of giving equal importance to the dignity, status, equal rights, characteristics and equal development is progressive nationalism.²⁰

Another important faction of the ULFA, led by its chairperson, Arabinda Rajkhowa, and most of the top-level leadership of the organisation, is also currently involved in negotiations with the Indian government. Only its army chief, Paresh Baruah, and a small number of his followers remain recalcitrant. With a majority of the founding leaders opposed to Baruah's hawkish stand though, the ULFA too has by and large joined the ranks of other powerful insurgent groups of the Northeast that have been classified by Subir Bhaumik as those which started with 'sharp initial separatist overtones but . . . were ultimately co-opted by the Indian system through sustained negotiations and concessions' (2007: 7). Bhaumik suggests that the insurgencies of the Northeast can be categorised into four other types:

- (i) Those based on 'a deep rooted historical ethos of independence that developed into a struggle for secession from India – the Naga insurgency is the best and perhaps the only example in this category'.
- (ii) Others like the Bodo insurgents of Assam that were 'separatist in rhetoric but autonomist in aspiration, thus easy to co-opt into the so called Indian "mainstream"'.
- (iii) A few other groups which sought to 'change the Indian system' and have fraternal allies in mainland India, for example 'the Manipur PLA before 1990 or communist insurgents of Tripura in 1948–50'.
- (iv) And the satellite insurgent groups, including the Dragon Force or the United Peoples Volunteers of Arunachal (UPVA) that are 'propped up by more powerful groups', such as the Assamese or Naga insurgent groups. (Ibid.)

The KLO is not exactly a satellite group, although it does depend on the more powerful ULFA for training and arms. With a large section of its leadership having by now entered into a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government and advocating peace talks, the NDFB also has been largely co-opted by the Indian establishment. The separatist rhetoric of both the ULFA and the NDFB has now toned

down, although there are still a few leaders in both the organisations who would agree to hold negotiations only on the subject of sovereignty. Thus, factionalism has raised its head among the various insurgent groups, and this has been one of the major tools used by the Indian security and political establishments to tackle insurgents in the Northeast.

The fact that the Indian State has habitually relied on such tools to counter insurgencies, rather than engage in efforts to address the ethnic aspirations that gave rise to them in the first place, has led to a proliferation of insurgent movements in Assam and the Northeast. 'Since Delhi has often come forward to meet ethnic aspirations only after a bout of armed guerilla warfare, the lessons have not been lost on all aspirant ethnicities' (Bhaumik 2007: 7).

The NDFB and the KLO were both born out of a lack of an empathetic response to the ethnic aspirations of the communities they represent. But despite close collaboration on many instances between the two groups – as well as between the two groups and the ULFA – they have not been able to gainfully unite against their common enemy, the Indian State. This has been a failure, despite repeated efforts at concerted action, on the part of almost all the insurgent groups of the Northeast: they have all failed to unite against their 'distant' enemy, which has also been a 'constant' one (Bhaumik 2007: 6).²¹

The constancy of the identity of the distant enemy has led many scholars to dub the insurgencies of the Northeast as a centre-versus-periphery contest. To do this, however, would be to overlook the role of the 'perceived regional overlord, a dominant ethnic group seen in control of a political-administrative unit, for which the rebels were keen to break away'. This is the 'immediate' enemy within the 'periphery' – if one could use that term at all – and it has 'varied from state to state and from situation to situation' (ibid.: 6). In the case of the KLO, it has been the Bengali Hindu community of West Bengal. The Koch-Rajbangsi community of Assam has assimilated too far into the Axamiyā fold to be able to clearly identify the Axamiyā community as a whole as its enemy. The Axamiyā community, however, has been identified more often than not as the immediate enemy in the case of most of the insurgent movements of the Northeast. For the Bodos of Assam, definitely, the dominant Axamiyā were once the most potent and immediate enemy.

NOTES

1. This stand of the BSS was subsequently revised to advocate the use of the Devanagiri script.
2. The Protected Area Permit (PAP) or the Restricted Area Permit (RAP) is a provision under the Foreigners (Protected Areas) Order, 1958, whereby all areas falling between the Inner Line and the international border of the state have been declared as a 'protected area'. In the Northeast, with certain exceptions, foreigners visiting Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Sikkim require RAPs. For more details, see <http://www.mha.nic.in/pdfs/Foreign-FAQs-onPAPandRAP.pdf> (accessed 29 August 2012).
3. The practice among many of the indigenous communities of the Northeast was of community control over land. However, since the 20th century, a lot of changes have crept in as the communities transitioned from shifting to settled cultivation and land became commodified. Given the stated intent of the Sixth Schedule to safeguard customary laws and traditions, several restrictions were introduced under it to limit the rights of Indian nationals to acquire landed property in the areas where the schedule is applicable.
4. See the official website of the Parliament of India, <http://www.parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/lsdeb/ls13/ses11/181202.html> (accessed 31 January 2011).
5. See the official website of the All Assam Other Backward Classes Association, <http://www.obcassam.org/about.htm> (accessed 31 January 2011).
6. This text is available at http://www.neportal.org/northeastfiles/Assam/ActsOrdinances/Assam_Backward_Classes_Commission_Act_1993.asp (accessed 31 January 2011).
7. See the official website of the Parliament of India, <http://www.parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/lsdeb/ls13/ses11/181202.html> (accessed 31 January 2011).
8. See the official website of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), <http://www.asomganaparishad.in/origin.asp> (accessed 2 February 2011).
9. These included the Sidli and Bijni tribal belts in Goalpara; the South Kamrup (Choygaon), South Kamrup (Guwahati), Tamulpur, Baska, Chapaguri, and Kharija Bijni tribal belts and Bajegaon and Gobardhan tribal blocks in Kamrup; and the Balipara, Dalgaoon and Kalaigaon tribal belts and Gohpur, Teteli Bhangaguri, Kacharipara, Tezial, and Bhuiankhat tribal blocks in Darrang.
10. Under the Indian system of federal structuring, a union territory is an administrative division with less administrative powers than those of

a state. It is ruled directly by the centre through a governor, unlike a state which has a government of its own and where the governor is a figurehead.

11. The Mishing (or Mising) are another indigenous community of Assam who mainly inhabit Upper or eastern Assam, unlike the Bodos who inhabit mainly Lower or western Assam.
12. Richard M. Eaton has also found that: 'In Bengal, Muslim converts were drawn mainly from Rajbansi, Pod, Chandal, Kuch, and other indigenous groups that had been only lightly exposed to Brahmanic culture' (1993: 110).
13. The armed insurgent movements discussed in this chapter are only one facet of the ethnic conflicts prevalent in Assam. I have discussed so far how grievances against a dominant community have led to a proliferation of insurgent groups among ethnic communities. Such aggressive methods (as armed militancy) are seen as the only means of ethnic preservation and assertion by winning a share of the power and resources. In the next two chapters, I will explore how the Indian State has addressed ethnic aspirations and managed the resultant conflicts and insurgent movements of Assam. The measures taken to resolve these conflicts will be analysed for their effectiveness and the argument will be put forward that these measures of conflict resolution have, in fact, led to an exacerbation of conflicts in more ways than one.
14. South Asia Terrorism portal, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/klo.htm (accessed 2 February 2011).
15. Official website of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), <http://web.archive.org/web/20091027113256/www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Congress/7434/ulfa.htm> (accessed 2 February 2011).
16. Ibid.
17. South Asia Terrorism portal, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/klo.htm (accessed 2 February 2011).
18. South Asia Terrorism portal, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/Ndfb.htm (accessed 2 February 2011).
19. The e-magazine of ULFA (Pro-talk), http://www.sandhikhyan.org/issue/sandhikhyan/article/manifesto_of_pro-talk_ulfa_02-23-09-12-02-37 (accessed 1 December 2010).
20. Ibid.
21. One prominent failure was that of the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF) formed in 1990 through the joint efforts of some of the most prominent insurgent groups of the Northeast – the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K), the ULFA, and the Kuki National Army (KNA).

PART II

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Six

Addressing Conflicts

Militarisation and the Culture of Violence



The Indian State has relied heavily upon Western methods of conflict management¹ in addressing the ethnic conflicts of Assam, and the Northeast in general. It has thus, from time to time, entered into negotiations with aggrieved representatives of ethnic groups that have raised the banner of revolt against the State. Often, as an end result of such negotiations, it has also arrived at settlements with the other party in conflict. But such negotiations have only followed on the heels of another method of conflict settlement that the Indian State has habitually resorted to – militarisation.

As Cordula Reimann has pointed out, based as it is on the ‘ideology of management’, conflict settlement incorporates ‘all outcome oriented strategies for achieving sustainable win-win solutions and/or putting an end to direct violence, without necessarily addressing the underlying conflict causes’ (2004). The military is among the principal actors in this approach to conflicts. In India, whenever any community has launched a movement, whether violent or non-violent, to place its ethno-nationalist demands before the State, the latter has invariably responded with the use of force and military might to crush the movements. In those cases where the conflict had reached the intensity of armed insurgency, the State’s counter-insurgency operations have relied heavily on tools borrowed from the West. For instance, the village regroupings undertaken in Mizoram at the height of insurgency in the state followed the British model of counter-insurgency adopted in Malaya, wherein half a million Chinese were re-settled ‘in new villages protected by military units and wire fences’ (Jafa 1999). The same tactic was also used by the Americans in Vietnam (ibid.; Polk 2009: xxix).

But despite heavy reliance on such strategies, the Indian State has also often tempered its engagement with the conflicts in the region

by using the traditional Indian model of diplomacy advocated by the great statesman Kautilya. The use of this model in counter-insurgency operations has been illustrated by Subir Bhaumik (2007, 2009). It is based on the four principles of *sham* (conciliation), *dam* (monetary inducement), *danda* (use of force), and *bhed* (division, fragmentation). The result has been successful containment of the conflicts to a large extent. In more instances than one, it has also led to the co-option of certain actors and agents involved in the conflicts, as well as to the dilution of the conflict intensity and goals. Nevertheless, it has failed to transform the conflicts in any meaningful way that would address the final goals of a real conflict-resolution/transformation effort.

According to Jacob Bercovitch and Richard Jackson, '[c]onflicts are said to be resolved when (1) a discernible outcome has been reached; (2) conflict behavior terminates; and (3) a satisfactory distribution of values and resources has been agreed on' (2009: 20). The first criteria may have been fulfilled in addressing at least a few cases of conflict in the Northeast, but there has neither been a cessation of conflict behaviour nor a satisfactory distribution of resources and power among the conflict parties that we have been studying so far. It has already been noted how the conflict-resolution/settlement methods adopted to address the Bodo conflict have, in fact, led to more conflicts and discontent. This chapter, and the next, will go into the details of the mechanisms adopted to address the conflicts and try to identify why and how these have only led to an exacerbation of the same.

MILITARISATION AND DRACONIAN LAWS

The Northeast, tenuously connected to the Indian mainland by a 21-km-wide land corridor known as the 'chicken's neck', has always been constructed as the periphery in the mainland Indian imagination. According to stereotypes perpetuated in this imagination, the entire region is a homogenous entity, the land of untamed head-hunting tribals, a place to be shunned or visited at the risk of exposure to savage peoples and animal like behaviours.² Some may think of these folk beliefs as amusing but outdated. Alarming, however, vestiges of this 'Northeast myth' – residues of this popular fear of the violent, the untamed and the unknown – have remained in the Indian administrative and policy-making approaches towards the region. For the Indian State, the people of the Northeast seem to have remained

at either end of the spectrum stretching between the noble savage and the naked brute. The exoticised, enigmatic noble savage can be tamed (read co-opted), but the naked brute understands only the language of violence (cf. U. Goswami 2010b). It is for this reason that the first response of the State towards any disturbance in the periphery has been the use of violence and coercion, the most disturbing manifestation of which has been prolonged militarisation in the Northeast and the imposition on the region of draconian laws like the AFSPA and the Disturbed Areas Act.

The propensity of the Indian State to make violence its first resort is evident from the atrocities committed even on peaceful demonstrators and protestors by the police and the paramilitary forces on multiple occasions. This had been the case during the Assam Movement, which admittedly did turn violent in pockets, but had started off its protests against the State through non-violent methods of civil disobedience. The death of Khargeswar Talukdar, a young Axamiyā activist, in 1979 during baton charge by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) on a group of unarmed protestors sparked off widespread indignation among the supporters of the movement. General strikes were called and processions were taken out; in retaliation, the State declared a curfew while the army patrolled the streets armed with automatic weapons and under orders to shoot demonstrators at sight (cf. Rataan 2008: 108–9). A large number of people were beaten, killed and raped by the army and the CRPF in various parts of the state in the course of the movement (ibid.: 112). The emotional frenzy created by these incidents was used by sections of the movement's leadership to channelise the people's participation in more violent retaliation.

Similarly, when the Bodo Movement started, the Assam government – which ironically at the time comprised the leadership of the Assam Movement – also resorted to large-scale violence to subdue the Bodo activists. The ruling AGP party reacted with brutality to suppress the Bodo Movement. The ABSU alleged ‘unprecedented excessive police atrocities, operations, arrest and torture’ upon peaceful political workers (quoted in N. Hazarika 1998: 103). It also claimed: ‘In many occasions, numbers of time, police has been arresting indiscriminately on the pretext of forged cases on political ground and tortured the youths and students of ABSU very badly [*sid*’ (ibid.).

By 1990, the AGP government was ousted and a Congress-led government, which had in its turn brutally suppressed the Assam

Movement, returned to power. The measures that this government undertook, mostly under instructions from the Congress party government at the centre, will be discussed subsequently. Suffice it to say here that these measures not only failed to pacify the Bodos but also instigated them to resort overtly to violence against settler communities and to insurgency against the State. No lessons, however, have been learnt from the fallout of the Assam and the Bodo Movements, and the subsequent escalation of violence and the birth of militant reactions have not diminished the State's reliance on undue force during peaceful methods of protest. The atrocities committed on peaceful Koch-Rajbangsi protesters in the 2004 rally then, were not an isolated incident.

Though never officially admitted, it is a fact that in the midst of purportedly non-violent protests, there are sections of trouble-makers among the protestors as well. Through design or happenstance, these trouble-makers incite isolated incidents of violence and provoke police reaction. During the field interviews I conducted, Koch-Rajbangsi activists have admitted that they have often called general strikes in the Bodoland area, but at the same time indulged in acts of vandalism and violence in the course of these 'peaceful' protests. The main objective is to provoke State authorities to react, thus allowing the activists scope to justify violent 'reactions' on their own part. Such an atmosphere of subterfuge and resorting to underhand tactics on the part of professedly peaceful activists can never be justified, but it indicates how State-sponsored violence has begotten more violence in society.

A corollary of the violent tactics used as a matter of course by State agencies is the militarisation of the Northeastern region. Gautam Navlakha has revealed how sporadic official leaks have established that '80 per cent of the central paramilitary forces and at least three army corps strength is engaged in internal security operations' in India (1999: 1171). Of these, in 2007, 13,000 troops were deployed in Assam alone (Johnson 2007). The preoccupation of the Indian State with the question of 'security' in the Northeast, as well as with its 'underlying vulnerability and the manifest militaristic posture' can be interpreted as a legacy of a British Empire obsessed with putting in place 'an effective defensive system' on its 'vulnerable North East Frontier' (Akoijam 2005: 4). For the British Empire then, as for the Indian State now, the vulnerability of the Northeast frontier arose from its geo-political positioning, bound as it is by China, Bangladesh, Burma, Bhutan,

and Nepal. The Chinese aggression of 1962 and the near defeat India suffered have not quite been forgotten. Undoubtedly, then, a heavy presence of security forces in the region would be encouraged also to act as deterrence against external aggression, particularly since, from time to time, 'foreign hands' have indeed propped up insurgencies in the region by providing training, arms and sanctuary to rebels in the Northeast (cf. Bhaumik 2009).

The problem, however, is not that the Indian armed forces have been alive to the threat of external aggression or tried to prevent the destabilising effect some of the neighbouring countries have had in the region. The real problem lies in that in the course of their counter-insurgency operations against the Northeast rebel groups, there have been countless instances of transgression into the civilian domain. Often, the distinction between civil and military powers has been erased, providing an upper hand to the armed forces. The Unified Command structure was devised in Assam in 1997–98 to tackle insurgency by bringing the civil administration and armed forces together with respect to coordination and intelligence-sharing, and it put the chief secretary, a civil administrator, at the head of the structure. However, in practice, 'it gives much power to the army in actual operational planning and coordinate use of all military and other para-military forces' (Bhaumik 2007: 33).

Meanwhile, legislations such as the AFSPA and the Disturbed Areas Act also continue to uphold the supremacy of the armed forces, and what is more, give them *carte blanche* to continue with gross transgressions and violations of civil rights, to the extent of eroding basic human rights and freedoms. The legality of imposing the AFSPA, which 'permits a localized form of indefinite emergency rule' (Baruah 2010: 68), continues to be debated. Ravi Nair of the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre, for one, has pointed out how the AFSPA violates the Indian constitution-granted 'right to life, the right against arbitrary arrest and detention, the rules of the Indian Criminal Procedure Code relating to arrests, searches and seizures, and almost all relevant international human rights principles' (Nair cited in Baruah 2001: 68). Further, he states:

Courts and expert bodies have been far too willing to hide behind the ambiguity in the idea of the rule of law between the rule of substantive principles, and the notion that any governmental action conforms to the rule of law so long as it has formal legal sanction. (Ibid.)

Further, acts such as the AFSPA are not always used to actually counter insurgency – there have also been instances of their being imposed during periods of peaceful political protests, for example, during the Assam Movement. In response to a *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance) launched by supporters of the Assam Movement in 1980, the then governor of Assam, L. P. Singh, declared almost all of Assam a ‘disturbed area’ and brought the AFSPA into play.³ Much opposition followed, and even political leaders from mainland India condemned the imposition of the law as being equivalent to declaring ‘war on the people of Assam’ (Raatan 2008: 116).⁴

Indeed, the imposition of draconian laws such as the AFSPA has led a section of the intellectuals from the Northeast to conclude that:

The very idea of turning the Northeast into an ‘alien space’ where martial laws like AFSPA operates [*sid*] suggests that people of the region is [*sic*] closer to Hannah Arendt’s ‘objective enemies’ whose definition is created by virtue of their existence in a particular position at a historical moment in time, and that they do not fall within the self-definition of a state. (Oinam and Thangjam 2005: 4)

They interpret the prolonged militarisation of the Northeast in these terms:

The agents of the state, rather than approaching the affected people as citizens, treats them as ‘subjects’ adopts strategies applicable in International Relations [*sid*]. Thus, military and paramilitary forces are ‘deployed’ for the maintenance of ‘peace and order’ in the region. This can be read as ‘interventionist policy’ in an alien space. (Ibid.: 17)

Such a sense of alienation is engendered and nurtured by the State’s refusal to review its military strategy in the region and repeal or amend the martial laws.

LEGITIMISING VIOLENCE, BRUTALISING SOCIETY

Ironically, even certain sections of the security establishment have, from time to time, raised their doubts about this approach of the State. They are alive to the adverse effects of the deployment of the forces for maintaining internal security and the grant of immense powers in the course of such deployment by AFSPA-like acts. Former Indian Army Chief V. P. Malik, for instance, admitted that the involvement

of the army in internal security is 'neither good for the army nor for the nation' (Navlakha 1999: 1171). It is harmful for the army because, for one, it erodes its combat deterrence (*ibid.*). Meanwhile, acts such as the AFSPA and the sweeping powers that they grant the armed personnel have admittedly led to a brutalisation of the forces in India – and 'brutalised armies', as former Indian Army Chief General Shankar Roychoudhuri has been quoted as saying, 'are no good as fighting machines' (Bhaumik 2007: 35).

Apart from such a degeneration of the armed forces, other agencies that do not enjoy the license to kill, such as that granted by the AFSPA, are also inspired to seek the same powers. Thus, the deputy inspector general (DIG) of the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) met with the Committee to Review the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 on 21 February 2005, to request that the force be granted legal powers and protection 'against vexatious prosecution for acts done during the discharge of their duty' (DIG, CISF, Guwahati 2005). The poignancy of this request is underlined by the shooting of Nilikesh Gogoi, an Axamiyā businessman and local community leader of a small town called Geleky in Assam, by CISF personnel on 23 January 2007 on suspicions of being an insurgent (*The Telegraph* 2007). A spokesperson of the CISF later called the incident 'unfortunate' and admitted that the force had been deployed in the area to guard an installation of the public-sector Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) and was not 'involved in counter insurgency operations' (*ibid.*).

In such a kill-as-you-like environment, fostered by none other than the State's forces and upheld by its legislations, society at large has become brutalised. The violence and the disregard for human rights and human life that have been legitimised by acts such as the AFSPA have filtered into society and let loose a vicious cycle of violent response that gives birth to more violence, of brutalisation which erodes ideologies, and of State sanctioned terror, which engenders a disregard for peaceful alternatives (cf. Goswami 2010b). On the one hand, even those insurgent groups of the Northeast which had widespread support and a strong ideological base have in recent years, been broken down by the brutalised forces, and on the other, they have also started reflecting in many ways the same brutalisation. For instance, the Indian armed forces have frequently been accused of using sexual violence as a tactic for fighting their wars in the Northeast (cf. MASS 1998). Certainly, the number of rape cases reported in Assam and elsewhere in the Northeast in which armed

personnel have allegedly been involved are many. Then, in 2006, reports surfaced that an insurgent group of Manipur had gone on a rampage and raped about 21 Hmar women (*The Hindu* 2006). The concerned group, of course, denied its involvement in the incident, but the moral high ground it had hitherto occupied vis-à-vis the State was nonetheless undermined.

The Indian State has not remained confined to brutalising the armed forces, and has gone so far as to arm civilians with the express purpose of defending themselves against insurgent violence. There has been large-scale criticism and protests against the State's move to arm villagers to this end in Manipur (*Sangai Express* 2007). A similar proposal was also put forward in Karbi Anglong in Assam to arm settler populations against nativist militants in 2007 (Dolabhai 2007). It can only be imagined to what scale violence can escalate if guns and a license to kill are made so easily available to people at large.

Meanwhile, states are also encouraged to enlist youths and raise forces for the Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB), which can then be summoned by the central government for deployment in any part of India. Despite frequent protests by civil-society organisations, IRB personnel from two northeastern states, Mizoram and Nagaland, have been deployed in another troubled state of the Indian mainland – Chhattisgarh – which has been witnessing Naxalite insurgency. The plight of the people under the armed forces is quite similar in both the insurgency-affected areas. Ironically, however, many of the cases of atrocity and molestation recorded by human-rights activists in Chhattisgarh are perpetrated by IRB personnel from the northeastern states (AHRC 2007). Indeed, one of the greatest arguments against sending Naga youths to fight insurgents in Chhattisgarh was, besides the heavy death toll, their brutalisation along the lines of the other armed forces. Field interviews have revealed how the people of Nagaland and Manipur fear IRB personnel as much as other armed personnel of the Indian Union, given their propensity towards anti-social activities such as robbing, killing and extortion.

Thus, society and its individuals are being criminalised under the present approach of the Indian State. Violence has filtered into society, which has now internalised what Capt. (Retd.) Ashok K. Tipnis, in his 'Memorandum Submitted to the Committee to Review the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958' (2005), has termed the 'Freedom [to] Assume Special Powers [with] Arms (FASPA)'. The proliferation

of illegal arms, certainly has turned the BTAD into a zone of sustained conflict. In 2010, in the run-up to the second elections to the BTAD, the union home secretary issued a series of directives with the aim of conducting violence-free elections. These directives recognised the fact that there were various unlawful 'youth camps' in the area which stored illegal weapons and indulged in violent activities (MHA 2010). These camps had cropped up soon after the return to 'mainstream' of the BLT militants (field interviews). According to the agreement reached between the government and the BLT leadership under the Bodo Accord signed in 2003, a home ministry directive was passed in 2004 stating that the paramilitary forces would appoint 1,000 former militants, including 550 in the CRPF, 300 in the Border Security Force (BSF) and 150 in the Assam Rifles (AR).⁵ However, the total number of militants who surrendered was much more – at a surrender ceremony held on 6 December 2003, as many as 2,623 BLT cadres laid down their arms (Das Gupta 2003). Very few of them could procure gainful employment; the rest remained involved in anti-social activities. News reports of the involvement of ex-BLT cadres in violent activities have not ceased.⁶

On the other hand, a section of the surrendered militants from the ULFA were officially allowed to retain their arms despite their leaving the organisation. These militants, comprising mostly of the ULFA's second-rung leadership, were weaned away from the organisation and persuaded to surrender in the 1990s. In return, they were paid huge sums of money as rehabilitation grants and 'soft loans' that they never returned. They were also never persecuted for any of the crimes they committed, although no amnesty had been declared (Sahni and Routray 2001). Like the BLT cadres, many Surrendered ULFA (SULFA) cadres were also provided jobs in government undertakings and the security forces, thus reinforcing the perception that joining armed groups was not just a means of earning good money but also getting away with crimes, and what is more, being appointed in government jobs. It cannot be denied, of course, that some of the surrendered militants have indeed regrouped to serve society in more productive ways by working for social welfare and the development of society (cf. Todd 2008). For the most part, however, the SULFA cadres have indulged in large-scale anti-social activities, including 'extortion, intimidation, crimes of extreme violence, and the terrorization of wide sections of the population', often with the State agencies looking the other way. In this way, the State has

‘created a Frankensteinian (sic) monster, a gigantic organized crime conglomerate that ... abandons its political intent, and that operates substantially under the protection of, and in collusion with, the state and its agents’ (Sahni and Routray 2001). Under such an atmosphere, militant groups have turned mercenaries, ideologies have been eroded and insurgency movements have become highly criminalised.

FLAWED COUNTER-INSURGENCY POLICY

Armed insurgency is only the most violent manifestation of ethnic conflicts. Militarisation and legislations sanctioning military oppression – in spirit if not in letter – aim to control this manifestation. Only the symptoms, therefore, and not the cause of conflict, are addressed. If anything, the cause is strengthened and conflict is exacerbated, especially since the Indian State’s counter-insurgency policy in the Northeast has been a flawed one. Scholars who have studied violent conflicts and asymmetric wars agree that it is not always the stronger military power that wins. An ‘asymmetric conflict’ has been defined as being one ‘between two actors or groups of actors characterized by a large gap in material power relative to each other’ (Arreguín-Toft 2007). However, this gap does not signify that the actor with the stronger ‘material power’ wins the war. As William R. Polk points out: ‘Military commanders choose to overlook the Kenyan proverb that proclaims the power of the flea – “A flea can trouble a lion more than the lion can harm a flea”’ (2009: xxxi–ii).

Thus, despite facing the militarily strong Indian State, insurgency movements of the Northeast have been long-running ones. And had it not been for the policy of the Indian State to follow up military repression with offers of negotiation and such other conciliatory measures, it would not perhaps have enjoyed the kind of success it has in the Northeast in controlling the armed movements. Ceasefire agreements with armed groups are the first step in this process of conciliation and providing concessions, followed by offers of peace talks and usually thereafter, a settlement. This was the course followed in dealing with the BLT. Where it has not been possible to bring the entire group to a ceasefire agreement and from there to the negotiating table, the State has often resorted to drawing out the more amenable faction(s) first and then pressurising the rest of the group, which would be much weakened by the break-up in any case. Thus, a faction of the NDFB has been under a ceasefire agreement with the government since 2005. Its

cadres have been in government-designated camps ever since. Periodical reviews of the agreement have been made since then, although the promise of peace talks and a political settlement is yet to be fulfilled. The only headway made during this long period of ceasefire has been to ensure the Government of India that the militant cadres will not be able to return to the harsh life of jungle warfare again and that the earlier intractable stand of the leaders will be (as indeed it has been) softened and that they will be willing to settle for much less than their original demand for sovereignty. Meanwhile, in 2010, Ranjan Daimary, the leader of the anti-talks faction of the NDFB, was arrested in a neighbouring country which was under Indian diplomatic pressure. Cornered and isolated, Daimary is now known to have shown willingness to 'come forward for the talks' (*Northeast Today* 2010).

In the case of the ULFA, the process of breaking up the group has taken a much longer time. No official ceasefire agreement could be signed with the group till 2008, when two companies of its strongest military battalion, the 28th Battalion, declared a unilateral ceasefire and came forward to facilitate a peace dialogue with the government (Talukdar 2008). Those talks are yet to take place. In the meantime, most of the top leaders of the political wing of the organisation were arrested in 2010 and are currently mulling peace talks with the government, besides expressing a willingness to contest the state assembly elections. The military chief of the group, however, is unwilling to join the process, and the organisation has seen another split. Undoubtedly, amid so much factionalism, the strength of the group has been quite depleted, making it easier for the government to get the pro-talks faction to de-escalate its demands.

Even where a ceasefire agreement is signed, it does not necessarily entail a surrender of arms. Thus, armed cadres often defy ceasefire ground rules to freely roam in civilian areas, and often clash with the security forces or rival factions and militant groups. This is what has happened in the case of the NDFB faction under ceasefire. On the one hand, then, civilians are subjected to atrocities by the armed forces in their search for militants, and on the other, they are also often caught in the insurgent crossfire. The State agencies are seen doing precious little to prevent this.

At times also, the armed forces have acted independently of the political establishment in entering into agreements with various armed militant groups of the Northeast. Thus, the Indian army signed a cease-

fire agreement with the KLO in 2005. This agreement did not hold for longer than six months, but another similar agreement signed with an umbrella body of hill militant groups in neighbouring Manipur has not only endured since its signing in 2005, but has also tactically helped the armed forces. This Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement, which was endorsed by the central and state governments only in 2008, was signed with the hill militants who mainly belong to the Kuki and Zomi communities that have long been dominated by the Meiteis of the plains. Following the SoO, reports of how these smaller militant groups are being used to raid hideouts of the stronger valley-based insurgents have been surfacing every now and then (cf. BBC News 2005a). In this way, traditional ethnic rivalries are being used by the Indian armed forces to fight the more powerful militant groups of the Northeast, and this is the covert face of the State agencies' counter-insurgency wars in the region.

COVERT OPERATIONS AND CO-OPTION

A discussion of the covert counter-insurgency strategies adopted by the armed forces and other State agencies from time to time is essential as it illustrates how these strategies have not only made the conflict situation worse but also deepened the ethnic cleavages in society. The case of Manipur has already been discussed. In Assam, this has been done successfully in the twin hill districts of Dima Hasao (formerly the North Cachar Hills) and Karbi Anglong. While the Dima Hasao district is predominantly populated by the Dimasa community, Karbi Anglong has been traditionally dominated by the Karbis. Each of these communities has been demanding a separate homeland, and each has at least one armed group representing this demand. Since the cartographies of their respective homelands overlap, much animosity has been generated between them and their representative armed groups.

One of the factions of the Dimasa armed group, the Dima Halom Daogah (DHD), entered into a ceasefire agreement with the Indian government in 2003. Factions of the major Karbi militant groups, the United Peoples Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and the Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLFF), also signed such agreements in 2002. Since then, the government has been making some noise from time to time regarding the holding of 'peace talks',

a few inclusive rounds of which have indeed taken place. Meanwhile, the militants are comfortably ensconced in their government-designated camps, being supplied with all the necessities. In return, they are called upon once in a while to launch attacks on a rival faction or another militant group, and are paid handsome monetary rewards for the services rendered.⁷ During the Karbi–Dimasā ethnic clashes in Assam in 2005, militant groups belonging to both communities used their designated camps to launch attacks on each other (BBC News 2005b). When mass sentiments become embroiled in these crossfires, ethnic clashes take on a more violent character and ethnic cleavages naturally deepen. Often, violent actions by insurgent factions are reinforced by violence in the public sphere and vice versa, thus obliterating the difference between ethnic conflict in society and militancy. Although the BTAD has not extensively seen this kind of covert manipulation of the traditional rivalries between ethnic communities, the State has undoubtedly used intra-ethnic differences to create fratricidal clashes between the insurgent factions within the Bodo community. I have already discussed this phenomenon in the context of a script for the Bodo language.

Over and above this, there is also the strategy of co-opting a section of the former insurgents, turning them into administrators and rulers, giving them a share in governance and, in fine, providing them with the wherewithal to indulge in more violence with impunity. Indeed, co-opting the leadership of movements that have opposed its policies and politics has been one of the Kautilyan strategies habitually practised by the Indian State. The Assam Movement was called off after the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985; this accord facilitated the conversion of the movement's leaders into political rulers. The AGP was born out of this movement as the first regional party of Assam and it came to power with an overwhelming majority in the state elections, facilitated by the accord. Following their entry into the establishment, the former leaders of the anti-State movement now assumed the character of the same State that they had been fighting against. If they had been made victims of State atrocities during the course of their agitation against the establishment, they themselves, turned into oppressors when the Bodo Movement broke out soon after they assumed power. Such oppression only served to deepen the divide between the two communities: the agitating Bodos and the Xamiyā middle-class leadership.

For their part, the Axamiyā leadership raised allegations that the central government of India – with the Congress party in power at the time – had used the ethnic animosity between the two communities and instigated the Bodos into revolt in an effort to destabilise the popular non-Congress government they had formed in the state (cf. S. Hazarika 1995: 156). While claiming that the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), the Indian intelligence agency, was behind the provision of arms and training to Bodo activists, AGP Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta alleged: ‘The whole exercise appears to be part of a larger conspiracy to destabilise the AGP Government’ (*The Hindu* 1989). Indeed, if one looked closely at the tactics undertaken by Bodo activists to pressurise the state government, one could discern a high degree of military discipline and guerrilla efficiency. The ‘chicken’s-neck corridor’ that connects Assam to the rest of India falls within Bodo-dominated territory. The systematic way in which Bodo activists went about blocking rail and road transport in this area, to name one tactic among many, indicates proficiency in guerrilla warfare, and the training, according to many accounts, was given by the Indian State (cf. S. Hazarika 1995: 156). The origin of the BLT is also often traced to such covert patronage by the Indian State agencies, and this is another major reason why the NDFB and BLT cadres have always been at loggerheads. With its pronounced anti-India stance and demand for sovereignty, the NDFB was naturally inimical to the BLT, which advocated remaining within the constitutional ambit of India.

Even before the former BLT leaders became the rulers of the BTAD, there were many incidents of violence between the two groups, with each targeting the other’s cadres and sympathisers. In 1996, for instance, the BLT gunned down the general secretary of the Bodo Women’s Justice Forum (BWJF), an organisation widely recognised as a front of the NDFB. This let loose a series of fratricidal killings within the community, with accusations and counter-accusations flying ‘about the role of the state in arming the BLTF to annihilate the supporters of the other armed opposition group’ (Barbora 2005: 51). The role of the State in instigating such fratricidal violence between armed groups as well as in using insurgent armies to kill human-rights activists and other civil-society actors using democratic spaces to articulate dissent has often been commented upon (cf. MASS 1999). The most organised of these killing sprees took place in Assam between 1998 and 2001, the years that saw a spate of ‘secret killings’ or extra-judicial elimination

of arrested ULFA militants and their kith and kin, allegedly by the police force, with the help of SULFA militants (cf. Barpujari, Talukdar and Kaushik 2009; Sahni and Routray 2001). Although the estimates of actual casualties vary, the Manab Adhikar Sangram Samiti (MASS), a human-rights organisation widely considered sympathetic to the ULFA, claimed that in 1998–99, more than 110 people were victims of these secret killings (A. Sen 1999). The K. N. Saikia Commission instituted to enquire into the killings took ‘two years to produce three voluminous reports on 35 cases involving 50 deaths’ (*Hindustan Times* 2009). No concrete results in the form of identification of the culprits and their convictions have been achieved so far.

THINKING MEN/ARMED OPPRESSORS

Such criminalisation through co-option of insurgent factions is only one facet of the Indian State’s overwhelming reliance on the Kautilyan principle of *bhed*. Such splits have been introduced not just among insurgent ranks, but also at various levels, among the many actors in the ethnic conflicts raging in Assam. Ingenuously mixed with the other Kautilyan elements of *dam* and *sham* – besides *danda*, as discussed earlier – this policy has been able to contain conflicts at a superficial level. It has, however, brought the sincerity and commitment of the State towards finding a lasting solution to the problems of Assam and the Northeast into question.

Besides, most of these ‘conflict resolution’ methods are devised in conjunction with committees and think tanks where retired security personnel and administrators play a prominent role. These security personnel and administrators, in the past, would usually have served in the Northeast and taken part in counter-insurgency and/or military operations in the region. After retirement, they are considered ‘Northeast experts’ by the State, which relies on the insights provided by them to address the region’s conflicts. A most glaring example of this is the appointment of K. P. S. Gill, a prominent Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, who was posted in Assam, during the Assam Movement, to the North-East Study Group instituted by the union home ministry as well as to the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) constituted by the Government of India (1998–99) ‘to define the country’s strategic perspectives and policy options on defence and internal security’.⁸ There is much hatred towards Gill in the popular

sentiment of Assam and the Northeast, especially due to his role in ruthlessly targeting those who participated in the Assam Movement. The extent of this hatred is evident from a 'Letter to the Editor' sent to a newspaper published from Arunachal Pradesh, which identifies him as a 'mass murderer' (*The Arunachal Times* 2011). Because of his unpopularity, fear of public outrage led Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi to oppose Gill's appointment as governor of Assam in 2003, when the tenure of the previous governor (a retired general) expired (Ganapathy 2003). Ironically, Gill, who is also hailed as a 'supercop' for his role in crushing insurgency in the Punjab, is the president of the Institute for Conflict Management, New Delhi, which claims to be 'committed to the continuous evaluation and resolution of problems of internal security in South Asia'.⁹ The involvement of such individuals in framing approaches to conflict resolution in Assam and the Northeast certainly casts doubts on the real intent of the State's policies.



NOTES

1. The *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation* describes conflict management as: 'Activities undertaken to limit, mitigate and contain open conflict. In particular it refers to actions that aim to control and handle a conflict in order to limit its negative effects and bring it to an end and to prevent the vertical (i.e. intensification of violence) or horizontal (territorial spread) escalation of existing violent conflict' (Online *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation*, see http://berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/handbook_glossary.pdf; accessed 25 December 2010.)
2. A similar preconception had led Mahatma Gandhi to paint the Assamese as uncivilised savages in his *Hind Swaraj*. He made ample amendments to his outlook subsequently. For details, see his 'Lovely Assam' cited in S. Kakati (1954).
3. Sanjib Baruah (2001) notes that elsewhere in India, the governor's office is restricted 'constitutionally' and 'in normal circumstances' to 'ceremonial functions'. In the Northeast, however, 'the compulsions of the civil dispensation and the concerns of the security establishment make the governors of these states crucial nodes in the counter-insurgency network'. He also points out how the Indian State has more often than not appointed individuals with 'intimate connections with the security establishment' as governors of the northeastern states.

4. Under the AFSPA, grosser violations of human rights have taken place elsewhere in the Northeast. The atrocities on and killing of the villagers of Oinam in Manipur in 1987 by the Assam Rifles during Operation Bluebird, and the widespread torture, rape and killings in Assam in 1991 by the Indian Army during Operation Rhino are just a couple of examples.
5. South Asia Terrorism Portal, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/bltf.htm (accessed 2 February 2011).
6. Ibid.
7. Field visits to designated camps and interviews with insurgent leaders have revealed much of these details.
8. South Asia Terrorism Portal, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/icm/Profiles/kpsgill.html> (accessed 30 June 2011).
9. South Asia Terrorism Portal, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/icm/index.html> (accessed 30 June 2011).

Seven

Addressing Conflicts

Negotiating, Power Sharing, Co-opting



Co-option of insurgent factions by the Indian State and their utilisation as tools for conflict management only exacerbates the situation and creates further divisions in society. It is, however, only one facet of a larger scheme of things where entire sections of the political and civil-society leadership are similarly co-opted with monetary inducements and the promise of participation in power-sharing arrangements. Opposition and protests are curbed using these Kautilyan principles and new power centres are created. A fresh set of ethnic elites are installed in these new centers and they continue perpetuating the same old ethnic hierarchies and perpetrating the earlier policies of suppressing ethnic aspirations, thus keeping alive the cycle of violence and conflict.

THE STRATEGY

The first step towards creating this new elite comprises offers of negotiations and peace talks. Negotiation or bargaining and arbitration constitute the most traditional method of settling conflicts, and it has been employed to address all kinds of conflicts all over the world since ancient times. This is because it is ‘embedded in all social systems’ and ‘because it contributes to their (societies’) continued existence’ (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009: 21). The continued relevance of negotiations in today’s changed approach to addressing and managing conflicts is evident in that even theorists and practitioners of conflict transformation advocate its employment. Nonetheless, the Indian State has never relied on negotiated settlements as a means of conflict resolution/transformation in its own right, nor as a first resort; rather, offers of negotiations have only followed after military deployment has de-escalated violence to some extent. Often, these negotiations have

led to settlements that have created co-opted ethnic elites, who were then showered with financial largesse and made partners in power. The underlying causes of conflict, meanwhile, remained unaddressed so that far from de-escalating conflicts, the settlements abetted and escalated violence. This only afforded the State an opportunity to deploy more military prowess, and the cycle of violence continued unabated.

The Negotiating Table

Negotiation by definition is ‘a voluntary process where parties may choose whether or not to enter into the process, and whether or not to accept or reject any potential solution’ (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009: 21). It implies therefore that the parties in conflict, which have now mutually agreed to enter into a dialogue to solve the conflict, have, or should have, an equality of status in the process. In the case of the Indian State, however, when an offer of negotiation has been made to the leadership of any ethnic community in conflict or to its representative insurgent group, it has more often than not been on the terms set by the State. After launching military operations against insurgent groups or wreaking State-sponsored violence against political protestors – in the manner described in the last chapter – the State has offered to hold political dialogues with the much-enervated forces of the opposition. Most insurgent groups of the Northeast have thus been accommodated in the negotiation process only when their military strengths have been perceptibly depleted. On occasions when they have offered to come for talks with the government of their own free will, their offers have been turned down, not given ample importance or stalled till stalemate.

The ULFA offered to negotiate with the government in 2005 and formed the Peoples’ Consultative Group (PCG), comprising journalists, rights activists, lawyers, and academics who were entrusted with the task ‘to clear the roadblocks and prepare the grounds for direct talks between the ULFA and the Government of India’ (W. Hussain 2006: 1). Meanwhile, noted Axamiyā writer Indira Goswami had also undertaken a similar mission of her own to mediate between the insurgent group and the government in order to find a negotiated settlement for the conflict. She also subsequently became a part of the PCG. Traditionally, a mediator is somebody who puts her knowledge and skills voluntarily and confidentially at the service of the parties in conflict. Because the mediator has authority and

is expected to be impartial, the parties accept her mediation skills (S. Horowitz 2007: 53). Since Goswami has an iconic standing in Assam, her offer to mediate was met positively by both the Government of India and the ULFA. Further, PCG members too were prominent citizens of Assam and important Track II actors, or 'informal conflict resolution experts' (Reimann 2004).¹ The government could not be seen as disregarding them and so, held three rounds of talks with the PCG in 2005–06. However, while the discussions with the PCG were on, military operations by both the armed group and the State's security forces continued, despite a ceasefire agreement, and each side continued to accuse the other of insincerity. Finally, when the time came for the government to commit to the decisions taken during its discussions with the PCG, it stalled the process of bringing the ULFA to the negotiating table by claiming that the militant group was yet to communicate officially with the government about its willingness to hold peace talks. And it did this despite the formation of the PCG for the express purpose and despite claims by PCG members that an official letter had indeed been sent to the Indian prime minister prior to the formation of the group (*Outlook India* 2007). Clearly, then, the government was unwilling to talk to the militant group at a time when the latter was offering to negotiate with it from a position of strength.

In 2010, after most of its top leadership, including the chairperson, had been arrested, the ULFA was cornered and the government, perceiving it as a spent force, offered peace talks and released most of the central committee members of the insurgent group in order to create an amenable atmosphere for dialogue. Indications at the time had been that the released ULFA leaders will renounce violence and enter the political arena, maybe even fight democratic elections. They will thus be joining the establishment they had been rebelling against. Once again, the Indian government seems to have contained a conflict situation successfully by combining its military response with the promise of negotiations, which are currently being held under unequal terms. Negotiations characteristically bring conflict parties together in a 'mixed-motive relationship', 'in which they have both conflicting and common interests' (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009: 21). By enervating and co-opting the other party before entering into negotiations, the Indian State minimises the conflicting interests, so that the negotiated settlement serves its objectives and interests

more than that of the other party. But as William Zartman and Jeffrey Rubin (2000: 15–19) have argued, negotiations have a better chance of being successful only if the parties involved enjoy relatively equal levels of power.

However, in the State's negotiations with the group, one major obstacle to the peace talks with the ULFA remains unaddressed. It is that the military chief of the organisation, Paresh Barua, is yet to join the negotiations despite the fact that most of the rest of the top leadership has been co-opted. Since the fire power rests with Barua, if the State fails to rope him in, one can expect large-scale violence to break out in Assam as a fallout of the 'peace' process.

Meanwhile, sections of the KLO leadership have also shown eagerness to enter into a dialogue with the Indian government (*The Times of India* 2009). Their offer, however, has not found any takers. The non-militant Koch-Rajbangsi groups have also been appealing for talks with the government in order to arrive at a solution to their problems (*The Telegraph* 2009), but to no avail. Such disregard of offers for a peaceful settlement of a conflict that is on the verge of turning into a large-scale violent movement might only make matters worse. No lessons, it seems, have been learnt from history. The disregard of the willingness shown by the leadership of the Assam Movement to place their demands peaceably before the government in 1978–79 had led to an escalation of violence during the movement. Surprisingly, this same leadership of the Assam Movement had also disregarded the Bodo people's demands when they came to power. Not only were the Bodo ethnic aspirations not accommodated and their position not negotiated, there were instances when the Bodo Movement's leaders were treated with utter disdain. In 1989, after the launch of the Bodo Movement, the then chief minister, Prafulla Mahanta, invited the ABSU leadership for a meeting in Guwahati. When the ABSU leaders arrived, however, they were neither met by the chief minister himself nor by any of his ministers. Three little-known members of the legislative assembly were sent instead to represent the Assam government in this meeting where the Bodo representatives were treated quite shabbily (Borgohain 2001: 130). The existing ethnic hierarchy in Assam had already created much suspicion and resentment against the dominant Axamiyā section. Over and above that, when such treatment was meted out to the leaders of the aggrieved community by the rulers who represented the dominant community, the conflict situation could only get aggravated – and so it did.

In critiquing the failure of the State mechanism to reach a long-term negotiated resolution to the ethnic conflicts in Assam, it needs to also be admitted that although parties in conflict everywhere in the world rely overwhelmingly upon it, peaceful negotiations have not been known to have a very high rate of success.

In a study of peacefully settled conflicts in Europe, the Middle East and Africa since 1945 (Pfetsch and Roloff 2000) the authors found only 13 out of 121 cases of conflicts over ethnicity, religion or regional autonomy that were resolved through peaceful negotiation (these include the Aland Islands, Northern Epirus, the Saar and South Tyrol). 51 remain undecided, 8 were resolved by the threat of force or other forms of coercion, and 49 by violence. The great majority of the peaceful cases were republics of the former Soviet Union which peacefully broke away in 1991. (Miall 2004)

Bercovitch and Jackson (2001) have found various reasons responsible for this. According to them, conflicts which are 'high intensity', intractable and fought over intangible issues such as ethnicity and religion are not suited for negotiations. Moreover, if there is a power disparity between the combatants, success can never be guaranteed through negotiations. All these factors have been present, in varying degrees, in the conflicts characterising Assam. As such, even though negotiations and peace talks are being used as a tool to control the conflicts and a few settlements have been arrived at between the conflict parties, very few of them have held. If anything, most have only exacerbated the conflict situation.

In the case of the Bodo Movement, the power disparity was obvious. It was an asymmetric conflict that had developed over time into an intractable one that lasted for the better part of two decades. A less dominant ethnic group with few representatives in the seat of power taking on the dominant section of the Axamiyā community certainly made for an asymmetric conflict situation. Indeed, the State agencies bore down heavily upon the protesters using armed forces. In retaliation, the Bodos resorted to violent tactics and sections of the community armed themselves and wreaked violence on civilians. They used their strategic location in western Assam, at the land entry point from mainland India to the Northeast, to pressurise the government. Like most intractable or protracted conflicts, the Bodo conflict endured for years thereafter 'at the middle range of the escalation

curve ... (where) violence is ongoing and episodic but not sufficient to make the idea of a political solution an attractive alternative to the status quo' (Hampson, Crocker and Aall 2007: 45). It was only after 1993, when militant nativists stepped up the scale of violence, that there came about an agreement on changing the status quo, and a redistribution of political power and resources. But even for this to happen, the people of Assam had to endure a decade of extreme violence, the kind which 'post'-colonial Assam had never seen before.

The basic 'human needs' theory argues that when the denial of human needs – and identity is one of them – is at the root of conflicts, traditional conflict-settlement methods, such as negotiations which focus on a redistribution of resources, often fail to resolve conflicts. The symptoms, rather than the actual cause of conflict, are addressed during negotiations and 'they leave unexamined the relationship between structures and needs satisfaction'. As a result, identity needs 'are further violated when left unaddressed' and the conflict intensifies (Cook-Huffman 2009: 22). In the end, more often than not, conflict parties are willing to escalate the violence, often using extreme measures to force the system to meet their needs (Burton 1990; Rothman and Olson 2001). This is what happened in the aftermath of the first accord signed between the Bodo leadership and the Assam government.

Accords and Discords

As a *dénouement* to the long-drawn-out negotiations and peacetalks processes which the Indian government has entered into with conflict parties from time to time, various MoUs, Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) as well as peace accords have been signed. None of these, however, have been able to provide a sustainable resolution to any of the conflicts they addressed. The Assam Accord of 1985, in fact, led to a further fragmentation of the interethnic fabric of Axamiyā society. It also laid the foundation of most of the violent ethnic conflicts that were to follow in Assam, starting with the Bodo Movement.

Certain clauses in the Assam Accord could indeed be interpreted as threatening the indigenous communities of Assam and benefitting only the dominant Axamiyā-speaking Hindu middle class. Clause 10 of the accord, for instance, states that: 'It will be ensured that relevant laws for prevention of encroachment of government lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorized encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws'.² Immediately after coming to

power, then, the AGP government started large-scale eviction drives, especially in the areas inhabited by immigrant Muslims. However, reports of indigenous autochthons being targeted also surfaced. Given that the land ownership laws were themselves suspect and there were many ways in which the peasant could be – and indeed was – deprived of his rights over the land he cultivated, these evictions led to a lot of fear and suspicion among the different communities of Assam. Leaders of the indigenous communities that were already fighting a losing battle against land alienation and the non-implementation of the provisions under the Tribal Belts and Blocks saw this as a further threat to their land rights and livelihood. Many of them were forest dwellers, had no *pattas* (documents of land ownership) and could easily be interpreted as ‘encroachers’. Certain incidents that took place during the Assam Movement had, in the meantime, exposed how a section of the Axamiyā middle class was engaged in exploiting ‘tribal’ peasants, depriving them of their land and branding them ‘outsiders’. The Phulung Sapor incident of 1979 where a Bodo peasant, Bihuram Boro, was shot dead by the state police stands out in this respect. Boro was killed in the course of an anti-encroachment drive undertaken by the police reportedly at the behest of the AASU, which identified the indigenous villagers as illegally cultivating government land (cf. Gohain 1995 [1982]: 19–25).

Meanwhile, there were also instances during the same movement when Koch-Rajbangsi individuals were branded ‘foreigners’ and their deportation demanded. Many Koch-Rajbangsis of Goalpara district were, in fact, served expulsion notices, harassed by the police and dragged to court. During the AGP rule of 1985–90, one Koch-Rajbangsi woman, Niro Bala Roy, of Kokrajhar district was also deported from Assam (Choudhury 2006: 18). The result has been a growing mistrust against the dominant class and a perception that the definition of ‘Axamiyā’ applies only to that class/community. Thus, the use of the word ‘Assamese’ in Clause 6 of the Assam Accord has also led to a lot of controversies and confusions which have not died down since. The clause states: ‘Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the culture, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people’.³

Hiteshwar Saikia, the then chief minister of Assam, declared after the signing of the Assam Accord that the term ‘Assamese people’ in this clause refers to the ‘people of Assam’. His successor and signatory

to the accord, Prafulla Mahanta, also proclaimed subsequently that the permanent inhabitants of Assam are included in the definition of 'Assamese people' (Borgohain 2001: 50). However, given the xenophobia and ultra-nationalistic atmosphere created during the course of the Assam Movement, the other communities of Assam could not be reassured that it did not merely refer to safeguarding the interests of the dominant community. Till this day, in fact, there is no official definition of the word 'Assamese' or 'Axamiyā', and this has been the subject of endless discussions and debates. In the post-Assam Movement period, the other communities have moved away from considering themselves part of this definition. They have often been seen assuming an inimical attitude to being considered as such and have issued tirades against the 'artificial Assamese community' (ABSU 1987a) in their political literature. In fact, in the early years of the Bodo Movement, Axamiyā people living in the Bodoland areas were targeted and their ouster demanded. The easily available targets (such as doctors and nurses posted in interior government health centres, and forest officials) were killed by the militant nativist groups.

As the Bodo Movement progressed, there was a leadership crisis in the early 1990s. There was also an increasing realisation that the ruling class would not concede a separate state. The community would have to make do with an autonomous council, and they were granted one in 1993 following the signing of the BAC Accord. In such a situation, they could not afford to antagonise the dominant community any further. Their new enemies now were the settler communities such as the Adivasis and the Muslims of East Bengali origin, for whom the dominant community did not anyway have much sympathy, as the events of the Assam Movement had shown. The massacre at Nellie in 1983 where an entire village of immigrant Muslims had been slaughtered was a case in point. Certain clauses of the BAC Accord escalated this enmity to an extremely violent pitch.

One of the major reasons of this escalation was that although the accord provided for the creation of the BAC, it left the definition of the territory to be included under the BAC's jurisdiction vague. On the criterion for inclusion, however, it clearly stated that the land-records authorities would examine the list of villages furnished by the signatories to the accord – the ABSU and the BPAC. The aim would be to verify whether these villages had tribal inhabitants amounting to 50 per cent or more of the total population. Based on the findings, these villages would then be included or excluded from the BAC. As it turned out,

many of these villages did not have 50 per cent or more tribal population. As such BAC chief Sansuma Khungur Bwismutiary declared that: 'This is all our land and non-Bodos have come and settled here from time to time. So changed demography cannot be used against our aspiration for autonomy. If therefore we do not have majority, we might consider creating one' (BBC World Service Radio, South Asia Report, 12 March 1995).

One way of doing this would, of course, be settlement of more and more Bodo people in the Bodoland area. There are indeed instances of many Bodo families moving hearth and home from other parts of Assam to the case study area, around this time, to live in the new Bodo homeland (field interviews). But this did not account for much, and the movement was mostly urban-centric, the more affluent section alone being readily able to afford resettlement. An easier and faster method was then adopted, and ethnic cleansing exercises began in the Bodoland areas in 1993 where the immigrant Muslim community was targeted. Subsequently, in 1996 and 1998, the Adivasis were attacked.⁴ Besides the large number of people killed in these attacks, an even larger number of people were internally displaced. The 1993 carnage had officially left as many as 18,000 individuals from 3,658 families (almost all of them immigrant Muslims) displaced in Kokrajhar. In a memorandum to the chief minister of Assam by the Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon Saranartha Committee in 1996, it was estimated that there were more than 20,000 Muslims of East Bengali origin living in 18 relief camps in the Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon (now Chirang) districts by that year (M. Hussain 2000). In 1996, 202,684 individuals, mainly Adivasis, were displaced in Kokrajhar district alone (D.C. Kokrajhar 2000). Most of them – except, reportedly, the forest encroachers – returned to their homes soon after, but were targeted once again in 1998. This time the violence continued sporadically till the following year, and a total of 314,342 individuals were displaced. Of these, a small proportion belonged to the Bodo and Rabha⁵ communities; the rest were all Adivasis. By 2000, there were as yet 169,161 Adivasis in relief camps across Kokrajhar, which was by far the worst affected district (*ibid.*).

The BAC Accord, thus, led not to conflict resolution but to escalation on a grand scale. It had many other inherent flaws, both in its content and in the manner of its execution. Firstly, it was an instrument of understanding signed only by representatives of the state

government under state legislation. In a political set-up like India's, where despite its apparent federal structure, the centre is the fount of all power, state legislations are easily superseded. This was something that did not fail to come to the attention of the Bodo leaders, who soon rejected it. The accord also did not give many financial and legislative powers to the BAC. Besides, it lent itself to being defined as 'nonpolitical', given that the word 'political' found no mention in the text; it only promised to enable 'social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement' (Prabhakara 1993). The BAC Accord clearly showed a lack of empathy towards the aspirations of the Bodo people. It was nothing but an eyewash, a hastily drawn-up, half-hearted effort by the state to reach an agreement.

The BTC Accord drawn up a decade later, on the other hand, proved to be a much more potent instrument of political empowerment. The new rulers of Bodoland, the BPF leadership, have also entered into a seat-sharing arrangement with the ruling Congress party in Assam and have since been a part of the state government. It would appear then that the long-standing conflict between the Bodos and the dominant Axamiyā section has been put to rest. And yet, the BTAD continues to be among the most violent zones in Assam. Clearly problems persist.

THE PROBLEMS

One of the major discords that persists in Bodoland today is the Koch-Rajbangsi conflict.⁶ The agitation for an ST status and a separate homeland called Kamatapur that this community has launched also seems headed for a more violent phase. If the lessons from the (mis) handling of the Bodo conflict can be learnt and rectified though, such an eventuality can perhaps be averted. But there are many problems inherent in the instruments of conflict settlement and resolution that the State has adopted/adapted so far.

Anatomy of Autonomy

The perceived success of the BTC Accord – however qualified it may be – and the provisional settlement of the Bodo conflict has enthused the State to adopt a fresh approach to the ethnic conflicts in Assam. An extremely dangerous trend in addressing ethnic aspirations emerged

since the 1990s in Assam's politics, a trend that M. S. Prabhakara (2005), writer and journalist, calls 'fast food' politics, which involves finding *chat-pat* or quick-fix solutions to ethnic problems. Granting autonomous councils to any and every ethnic group in a process best described as 'mechanical autonomisation' (ibid.) typifies this trend. It involves signing MoUs with various ethnic groups to create autonomous councils for them, doling out economic largesse, and in fine, co-opting the ethnic elite who can control the direction that future ethnic assertions might take: 'The alacrity, not to speak of democratic response to popular demand, is astounding, given the history of violent agitations that have marked the grudging concession in respect of even the most legitimate of demands' (ibid.).

The subterfuge becomes evident when one compares the MoUs signed with the representatives of different communities; the text in each case is the same, with only the particulars such as the names of the communities varying from one MoU to the other. However, for any autonomous arrangement to succeed, it must be tailored to the specific 'historical, geographical, cultural, political and social circumstances' (Benedikter 2007: 4). Consequently, this 'inescapable atomisation' (Prabhakara 2005) of Assam through the grant of such hollow autonomies without regard to the actual needs and aspirations of the concerned communities can only lay the groundwork for future conflicts. This formulaic approach to addressing a basic human need is certainly nothing but tokenism and it violates one of the main principles behind autonomy which states: 'Autonomy is not established for the sake of privileges, but has to be built on the principles of equality and non-discrimination' (Benedikter 2007: 3).

In the case of Assam, privileges accrue to the ethnic elites, who can then be manipulated by the State at will. While it is true that as an instrument of conflict resolution, autonomy is largely granted to 'forestall or terminate demands for secession' as it allows 'self-determination without creating new boundaries and states' (Benedikter 2007: 61), the nature and extent of self-determination gained by the ethnic communities of Assam that have been granted autonomy under this 'fast food' style political arrangement is highly suspect. It can only be surmised that the Indian State is using these autonomous arrangements as just another instrument of co-option.

As it stands, the co-option of the Bodo leadership has solved very few problems for the State and none for the community at large.

For the Bodo leadership itself, autonomy brought with it many problems. For one, divisions surfaced within its ranks immediately after political power was handed over to it. Objections were raised against the validity of the BTC Accord itself since the BLT was the sole signatory to it and the other Bodo organisations that had been fighting for the self-determination of the community had been sidelined in the process. Then, when the BTAD was formed and elections to the BTC announced, a scramble for power saw the leadership of the community fragmented in many ways. The BPF–BPPF split, for instance, reflected the split between the former BLT and ABSU leadership respectively. Even during the process of selecting candidates to stand for the elections, resentment surfaced. The All Bodo Women's Welfare Forum (ABWWF), was forced to remain behind the scenes during the elections, given that not a single woman candidate got a ticket to fight the BTC elections. And this despite the fact that the ABWWF had played a highly-celebrated role in the Bodo Movement.

Thomas Benedikter has pointed out how autonomy allows for regional political forces, including former militants, to participate in the political system: 'Political competition can ... accentuate differences within ethnic groups and minority peoples, which can lead to more pluralism within previously monolithic ethnic parties. Territorial autonomy enhances integration in a democratic system' (2007: 62). In Bodo society, however, autonomy resulted in factionalism and fratricidal violence rather than peaceful integration in the democratic system. The blame for this was subsequently shifted to the Assam government. Certain sections of the local media alleged that all these internal conflicts were part of a blueprint drawn up by the Government of Assam to destabilise the BTC administration. The veracity or falsehood of such allegations is not relevant here. What is pertinent, however, is the question that arises from such claims, which is that if such interference is possible from any quarter, and if the leadership responsible for the administration of the autonomous council is susceptible to such interference, what is the nature of the autonomy granted?

BTC leaders who publicly sang praises of the state government (*The Assam Tribune* 2005) could nevertheless not get over their suspicion of the same government. They also demanded that the funds promised under the BTC Accord should be channelled directly to the BTC from the central government. After all, so long as the state

government controlled the flow of funds, the exercise of autonomy was under strain – it meant that as yet, ‘the institutional arrangements for autonomy were ... organically related to other institutions of the federal structure’ (Benedikter 2007: 313).

But showing such a preference for the intervention of the central government rather than that of the state also indicated that the BTC was engaging in a game of one-upmanship with the Assam government. As it stands, the spirit of Indian federalism has often been under suspicion given the strong centrist bias and the more-than-usual powers of ‘intervention and pre-emption at the state level’ that have been reserved for the central government (Benedikter 2007: 306). Granting autonomy should be a means ‘to redress the imbalance between a state majority and the ethnic minorities sharing the same territory’ (ibid.: 9). However, ‘vindictiveness and reversed discrimination’ between ethnic groups sharing an autonomous region only provides ‘a pretext for the central state to intervene, undermining the very basis of the autonomy’ (ibid.: 422). When the Bodo leadership calls for central intervention in its autonomous arrangement rather than cooperate with the dominant Axamiyā society, and when the Assam government does not sincerely collaborate with the Bodo leadership to make the territorial autonomy a success, the Kautilyan State finds more scope for exploiting the ethnic cleavages and newer conflicts proliferate while older ones fester.

Meanwhile, within the BTC itself, the structure of the autonomous arrangement echoes the unitary bias of the Indian State. It defeats the purpose of autonomy, which is to ‘re-territorialise’ politics and to make people see themselves as part of local communities, rather than a centralised State or structure (Keating 1999). The BTC is, after all, a highly centralised body with no provision for further devolution of power. Clause 4.8 of the BTC MoS states that the Panchayati Raj system will cease to be in force in the council area. The Panchayati Raj system is the village-level third tier envisaged in the Indian federal set-up below the state, which comprises the second. Though its implementation and success is much in doubt, it nonetheless represents a powerful model of decentralisation, with the village as the centre in a bottom-up approach to administration. For the Bodo society, with its traditional decentralised decision-making bodies such as the *samāj*, or village council, the BTC has evidently not been very empowering of the people at the grassroots.

The BTC administration has failed to meet the aspirations of its own community in other ways as well. While the leadership indulges in excesses and ostentations – for example, a multi-million-rupee wedding for its chief, Hagrama Mohilary – the lot of the common people has not changed much. Two years into the creation of the BTAD, the people had to go on a ‘no road, no vote’ campaign prior to the BTC elections: the protestors were Bodo people (*The Sentinel* 2005b). Another five to six years later today, a drive down the pothole-riddled National Highway 31, which runs through the BTAD, stands witness to the spectacular lack of infrastructural development in the autonomous area.

Various other instances of deprivation vis-à-vis the Bodo people have also surfaced. Resentment among non-Bodo communities is also on the rise. They resent their inclusion within the BTAD and demand more access to power. As Benedikter puts it: ‘Internally, particularly when there are two or more ethnic groups sharing the same autonomous region, there must be consociational arrangements to grant access and participation to power to all relevant ethnic groups living in same autonomous territory’ (2007: 426).

However, in the absence of such arrangements, various non-Bodo organisations raised their voices against elections being held in the BTAD. A few armed groups representing other communities in the BTAD have also become more active. These include Adivasi groups such as the Birsas Commando Force (BCF) and the Adivasi Cobra Force (ACF). The KLO too has been involved in isolated incidents of violence from time to time. Meanwhile, despite relevant provisions in the BTC Accord and assurances by the BTC administration, the IDPs continue to remain disenfranchised and without any access to land or livelihood. The make-shift relief camps in which they have been living for years on end have taken on the nature of temporary villages by now. It is in these camps/villages that more trouble and future conflicts could very well be brewing.

Ad Hoc Policies

During multiple visits to IDP camps in the case study area, I came across militant cadres of Adivasi armed groups who acted as gatekeepers of access to information and informants. These groups were formed expressly for the protection of the Adivasi people of Lower Assam⁷ in the aftermath of ethnic violence. Their presence in the

camps is aimed at deterring attacks upon the inmates by Bodo militant groups, of which there have been instances despite the fact that security outposts were erected beside the government-sponsored camps. Indeed, at times, even security personnel have threatened the security of the inmates (field interviews). Under such constant threats and in the absence of sustainable livelihood options, aggrieved IDPs often join the militant groups. Not surprisingly, then, IDP camps have proved to be fertile grounds for recruitment by armed organisations.

Meanwhile, the Indian State is yet to ratify the United Nations Guiding Principles on IDPs. Neither does it have a 'national policy, legislation or other mechanisms to respond to internal displacement caused by armed conflict and ethnic or communal violence'. When internal displacement does occur, then, the job of assisting the IDPs is delegated to the state government and district authorities. In the absence of a national policy, at worst, the authorities claim powerlessness in making any decisions regarding IDPs, and at best, district authorities draw up ad hoc policies to deal with the situation (cf. IDMC 2010: 17–18). At the same time, humanitarian and human rights agencies are also provided only limited access to the IDPs, so that they are left at the mercy of these ad hoc policies. The usual flow of events following any instance of internal displacement is as follows:

[I]mmediately after the violence, temporary relief camps are set up in local educational institutions and government office buildings. Subsequently makeshift cramped shelters are built on government land . . . The government provides Gratuitous Relief (GR) in the form of rice, lentils and oil regularly for a few years till the makeshift camps take on the nature of permanent settlements. When the GR stops and the people are forced to vacate the camps and to look for rehabilitation, they are provided only with a small rehabilitation grant (RG).

The RG is usually a pittance of a few thousand rupees, most of which is more often than not swindled by middlemen and government employees (U. Goswami 2006: 63–64).

While those displaced from forest villages and government land have nowhere to go, many IDPs with valid land ownership documents or *pattas* have also complained that their lands have been confiscated by the BTC and the State's paramilitary force, the Shasstra Seema Bal (SSB). Although alternative sites have been promised, the

patta-holders are not happy about losing their original lands (field interviews). A few religious organisations, such as the Lutheran World Service India (LWSI), have been addressing the livelihood needs in certain Adivasi pockets, but for the most part, the IDPs have lost their land and livelihood. As a result, many of these people are pushed into criminal and anti-social activities, some are mobilised by insurgent groups, and others continue living in poverty.

The bases of long-term conflicts are thus laid through ad hoc approaches to ethnic conflicts and their aftermath, thereby unleashing a cycle of violence begetting more violence. In cases where there was no pre-existing violence, other ad hoc policies of the State have created it. Thus, when the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills (now rechristened Dima Hasao) autonomous councils were created under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, the Bodo populations living in those areas were not granted ST status. Among the ABSU's earliest 92-point charter of demands was the demand to cover the Bodos of these twin hill districts on the south bank under the Sixth Schedule, which would provide an autonomous council for them within the territorial ambit of Assam. The Bodos on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra valley meanwhile would be granted their new state of Bodoland. Of course, this demand had to be scaled down subsequently, but not before much resentment had been created between the majority Karbi and Dimasa communities of both the hill districts.

The volatile situation created over the question of scheduling the Koch-Rajbangsis has already been touched upon. In an approach similar to that adopted towards the Bodos of the north and south banks of the Brahmaputra, the Indian State has also drawn a distinction between the Koches living in different geographical areas in terms of constitutional status. Thus, while the Koches are an ST in Meghalaya, in West Bengal, they are an SC. In Assam, they have been demanding an ST status. They were granted that status in January 1996 for a brief period by an ordinance passed by the president of India.⁸ By April 1997, however, the ordinance lapsed and the ST status was never renewed. Such a short-term notification created much confusion for members of the Koch-Rajbangsi community at various levels. For one, in matters of reservations, some sections of the community could, during the brief period that the ordinance was in force, avail

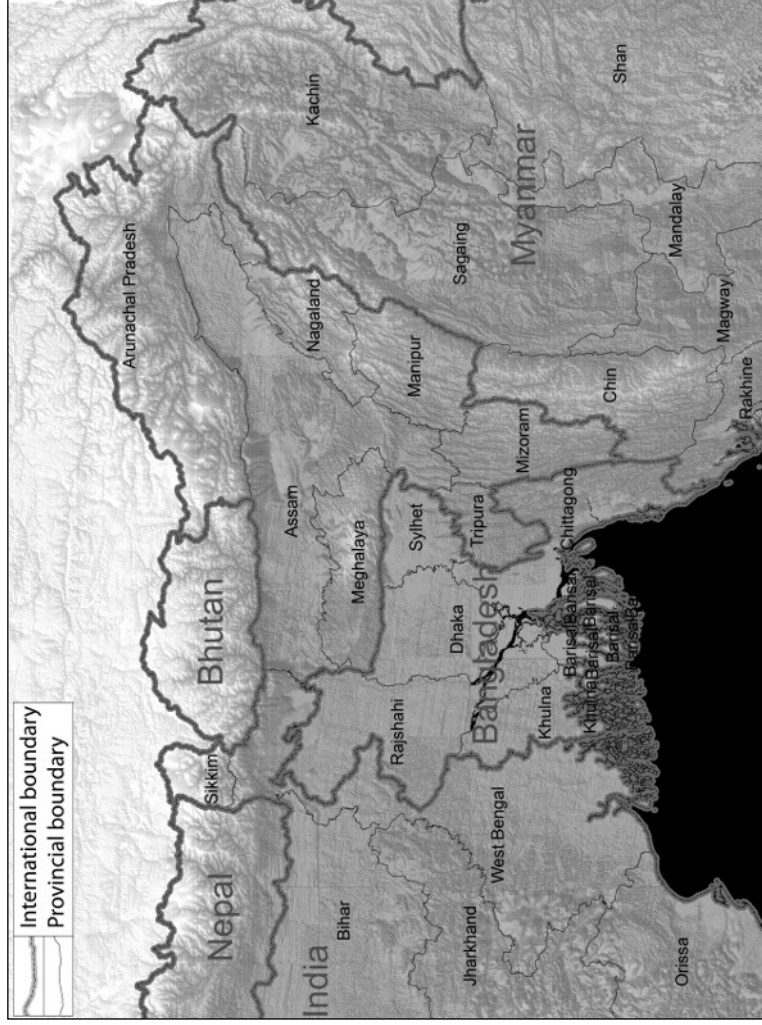
of these special privileges earmarked for scheduled communities. For others, it turned out to be a case of lost opportunities. In one particular instance, applicants to the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) course in the premier medical college of Assam were denied admission under the ST quota despite the fact that their applications had been accepted under the same category. This happened because in the interim period between the admission forms being submitted and the decision for admission being taken, the ordinance had ceased to be in force (Gauhati High Court Judgement 1998). The State's ad hoc policies have often in this way made a mockery of its own constitutional provisions and enraged the youth who are, after all, the driving force behind most political mobilisations.

EMPATHETIC APPROACH: THE NEED

The State definitely needs to revisit its approach towards the ethnic aspirations of the various communities of Assam. Kautilyan principles of real politik can only contain conflicts and maybe temporarily settle them. However, they have not brought the Indian State anywhere within sight of long-term conflict resolution or transformation. Conflicts are wasteful for all parties involved and in their transformation lie the seeds of progress and change. For India, specifically, there is an urgent need to address the conflicts in Assam and the Northeast as a whole in a more holistic manner, with an aim to sincerely transform them. It does not reflect well on the nature of Indian democracy – touted as the largest in the world – that more than 60 years after the country attained independence, portions of its territory are still troubled and wish to withdraw from its boundaries.

The significance of such rebellious and secessionist tendencies is heightened when one takes into consideration the strategic location of the Northeast in a geo-politically volatile international neighbourhood. India can still turn the tide in its favour if it amends its policies and approaches the region with an understanding that its geo-political vulnerability can be turned into a strategic and economic advantage for the country as a whole and for the region in particular. It can, for instance, be turned into 'a vital bridgehead with South East Asia and southwestern China' (Bhaumik 2009: 259) (see Map 7.1).

Map 7.1: Assam and Northeast India between South and Southeast Asia and China



Source: Sarat Phukan, Gauhati University. Map not to scale.

Many of the major secessionist organisations of the Northeast have, by this time, come to terms with a peaceful coexistence with and within India. From this perspective, the State's conflict-management policies have borne fruit. However, instead of pursuing its more conflict-exacerbating policies and keeping the region in ferment in order to serve its myopic goals, the State should now go for a longer-term gainful engagement with it. Proper handling of the multi-ethnic dynamics of the region will only indicate that India is not just the biggest democracy in the world, but also a mature one. And as the state at the heart of the region, it is imperative that Assam's ethnic problems are addressed with empathy and an eye for positive change.



NOTES

1. Track II actors include private individuals, academics, professionals, 'civil mediation', 'citizens diplomacy' to international and local NGOs involved in conflict resolution. The strategies they undertake are usually process-oriented, including non-official and non-coercive measures, mainly facilitation, consultation in the form of problem-solving workshops and round tables (Reimann 2004).
2. Available at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/assam_accord_1985.htm#Assam_Accord (accessed 4 February 2011).
3. Ibid.
4. The Bodos and the Adivasis of Assam had lived in harmony for a long time before differences between the two communities started creeping in during the first half of the 20th century. The growth and proliferation of a competitive Bodo middle class, heightened political consciousness among both communities and 'post'-colonial State policies that provided protective discrimination to the Bodos (but not to the Adivasis) were some of the reasons why conflict broke out between them. The conflict peaked in the 1990s.
5. The Rabhas are another indigenous community of Assam.
6. The conflict between the Bodos and the Adivasis, and between the Bodos and the Muslims of East Bengali origin, also continues in the meantime.
7. South Asia Terrorism Portal, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/terrorist_outfits/acf.htm (accessed 2 February 2011).
8. See the official website of the All Assam Other Backward Classes Association, <http://www.obcassam.org/about.htm> (accessed 31 January 2011).

Eight

Resolving Issues, Transforming Conflicts, Restoring Relations



In his experience as a peace worker and researcher, John Paul Lederach (1999, 2005) has identified four ‘gaps’ in the process of peacebuilding and transforming conflicts. He defines these gaps as the ‘inability or insufficiency in our conceptual and practice frameworks that weaken our capacity to sustain a desired process’ (Lederach 1999: 2). He identifies them as: an interdependence gap, a justice gap, a process-structure gap, and an authenticity gap. An interdependence gap refers to the vertical links within a conflict party, which are quite often overlooked in addressing conflicts. An example of this would be the ‘relationship between the elite level, the midlevel leaders and the grassroots level’ (Graf, Kramer and Nicolscou 2007: 125), which practitioners and researchers ignore while approaching conflicts horizontally; the usual approach is to have ‘equal meet equal’ (ibid.). In the case of the Indian State’s handling of the ethnic conflicts in Assam, the policy of co-option has often, in fact, deliberately created such a gap, giving birth to an ethnic elite and making them part of the establishment, thus dissociating them from the grassroots. Be it the leaders of the Assam and Bodo Movements or the insurgent leaders of the NDFB, the BLT or the ULFA, all have, to a greater or lesser degree, been co-opted in this way.

Similarly, the justice gap has also been perpetuated by ‘creating a gap between the expectations for peace and what it delivered’ (Lederach 1999: 5). Such a gap emerges most prominently when an agreement to end a conflict is signed in order to de-escalate direct violence but the ‘expectation that the decrease of direct violence will also be accompanied by a decrease in structural violence’ remains unmet (Graf, Kramer and Nicolscou 2007: 125). En masse surrender of the BLT insurgents in Bodoland following the Bodo settlement of 2003 did indeed de-escalate violence for a while, but since the

structural violence remained unaddressed and the interdependence gap was deepened, the BTAD has once again become the epicentre of much violence, albeit of a different nature post-settlement. In the same way, the signing of the Assam Accord diffused the mass movement that had nearly paralysed the economy and governance of Assam for almost six years. Its aftermath, however, saw the proliferation of ethnic conflicts in Assam.

Another reason why violence does not abate with negotiated peace agreements is that the peace that these agreements aim at is structure-oriented. They usually lead to 'the creation of new institutions, new or amended constitutional structures' and introduce new positions. The autonomous arrangement granted to the Bodo leaders, the formation of the BTC and the creation of the BTAD, and the amendment of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution, all created new structures of power. But peace is a dynamic process and needs to be approached as such through investing in attitudinal changes, fostering new relations and developing a culture of peace (Graf, Krams and Nicolsou 2007: 126). Such an approach towards the conflicts in Assam has been patently missing, thus giving rise to the process-structure gap. Sustainable peace has therefore remained unattainable.

At the same time, those who are affected by conflict and have to live with the peace arrangement devised for them by the State have also failed to take ownership of the tenuous peace that, despite all odds, does make itself manifest from time to time. This is the 'authenticity gap' Lederach (2005: 49) talks about, and it refers to the absence of organic peace, where peace is 'developed from within as opposed to imported or imposed from without' (*ibid.*). That most of these gaps occur in the conflict scenario of Assam is amply clear. In this chapter, I will lay out certain prescriptions for overcoming them. These prescriptions draw from the works of notable scholars, practitioners and organisations from Assam, the Northeast and beyond. After all, 'transformation as a concept is both descriptive of the conflict dynamics and prescriptive of the overall purpose that building peace pursues' (Lederach 1995: 18).

DIALOGUE AND SECURITY-SECTOR REFORM

In the field of International Relations, there is a strong argument that democratic States tend to prefer the resolution of conflicts

through peaceful and diplomatic means, foremost among which is negotiation and arbitration (Hampson, Crocker and Aall 2007: 37; Russett 1993). However, there is also an important distinction to be made between strong and weak democracies, with the latter showing 'a tendency to exhibit both illiberal and belligerent tendencies' (Hampson, Crocker and Aall 2007: 37). This has proven to be the case with State approaches to intra-state conflicts in South Asia. Pakistan, as a weak democracy, sought to crush the upsurge of Bengali nationalism in its eastern frontier through military excesses. This only exacerbated the conflict and led to the formation of a new country, Bangladesh. Neighbouring India, on the other hand, has been able to contain the ethno-nationalist movements in its northeastern frontier to a large extent by offering negotiations and peace dialogues. Decades-long struggles for sovereignty and secession in the region have therefore not been able to gain anything substantial from their long-drawn-out conflicts.

The Kautilyan principles behind this approach and the conflict exacerbation that has taken place as a result have already been discussed. It has also been discussed how offers of dialogues and negotiations have been made only after initial military operations have weakened the martial abilities of the insurgent groups or political machinations have managed to co-opt significant factions of the leadership of the other party in conflict. But if there is any political will to resolve the conflicts, negotiations between the conflict parties should not be held as a strategy for delaying a mutually beneficial settlement or to slowly erode the morale of the other party. Rather, there should be a commitment to the peace process from both sides. One of the favourite tactics used by both the insurgent groups and the government when they wish to postpone committing to an official dialogue is to play pass-the-buck. Earlier I have traced how both the ULFA and the Government of India continued to violate the ceasefire agreement and accuse each other of a lack of commitment to the peace process while the PCG was trying to finalise an agenda for negotiations between the two parties. The fact that such an agenda could not be finalised despite various rounds of talks also proves that neither party was willing to make compromises. The ULFA, as an organisation fighting for nearly three decades for liberation from the Indian State, was unwilling to talk if a discussion on 'sovereignty' was not on the agenda. On its part, the government was loath to face the ULFA leaders until the organisation lost some

of its strength and was willing to climb down from its staunchly held ideology. The ULFA's initiative, therefore, ended as an exercise in futility. For a dialogue to be successful, then, each party must be willing to make a few compromises in good faith. However, each should enter the negotiation process only when it 'is clear about the bottom line and the kind of concessions it can make' (Bhaumik 2009: 271). If not, both sides may blunder into a settlement that will create more conflicts than it can resolve – and past experiences have illustrated the importance of such clarity.

If required, both the State and the other party in conflict may appoint intermediaries: arbitrators, interlocutors or mediators. Sometimes, as in the case of renowned writer Indira Goswami, individuals with access to both parties in conflict may take up the task of mediation. However, a mediator's task is not without risks, and there is always 'the possibility of one party pushing the other, or using false information to drive the deceived party into an unfair settlement' (S. Horowitz 2007: 53). Such 'strategic interaction' necessitates that the mediator should be alert and capable of checking the veracity of the information provided so as to avoid 'preventable deceits' (Williams 1993). In the case of Indira Goswami's mediation efforts, a lack of clarity in the ULFA's approach and the Kautilyan shrewdness of the Indian State, both worked towards thwarting the well-meaning but politically naïve writer's efforts to find a solution to the long-drawn-out conflict and 'bring our boys home' (personal interview).

From time to time, the Indian State on its part has been appointing interlocutors to aid the process of dialogue. On the face of it, this showed its willingness to resolve the issues peacefully and through democratic means. More often than not, however, the interlocutors – mostly former bureaucrats and intelligence officers – have only functioned as the State's agents for implementing its policy of creating factions and co-opting the ethnic elite. Often, they are also appointed for the covert purpose of information gathering on insurgent groups. In order to make interlocution transparent, Bhaumik suggests that it 'should be handled by a liaison committee headed by a senior politician and assisted by representatives from the Home Ministry, Law Ministry, IB [Intelligence Bureau] and R&AW, the state governments concerned and civil society leaders in the region' (2009: 271).

Intelligence gathering, no doubt, has a very important role to play in any counter-insurgency operation conducted by the State, but to use

the negotiation process for the purpose is to erode the goodwill that needs to be built for the success of any dialogue. Instead, strengthening intelligence gathering in its own right and using the resources at the command of the intelligence community can have a salutary effect on conflict resolution. It will, for instance, reduce the need for large-scale military deployment because strong intelligence can help identify genuine insurgents at war with the State and military deployment can be de-escalated accordingly. Strengthening intelligence can also help decide on the force levels to be deployed in keeping with the actual requirement, thereby restoring the confidence of the civilian populations. Civilian casualties will also go down and human-rights violations will be contained to a large extent.

The deployment of armed forces in proportion to the problem must also be accompanied by a removal of draconian laws such as the AFSPA. Further, the armed forces should be made subject to the rule of law. The Eschborn Dialogue organised by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH (German Technical Cooperation) (GTZ 2000: 30–31) prescribed that security-sector reform on the political level should enhance its accountability and that the parliament and government must work together to control and monitor the armed forces. On the institutional level, it says that the security forces should be professionalised, and their doctrine and missions should be redefined in order to encourage respect for the rule of law and for human rights. In India, although the growing awareness about human-rights issues has compelled the military ‘to introduce human rights in its training curriculum’ (Bhaumik 2009: 227), violations continue unabated. The control of the civil administration over the Unified Command structure should be restored in practice and better information sharing among the security forces and the combined operations of the military with the state police forces should be encouraged. Currently, however, ‘the role of the State police in counter-insurgency operations is severely limited in the Northeast, with the Army and the Central para-military forces carrying the brunt of the responsibilities for fighting terror’ (Sahni and George 1999).

STRUCTURAL AND POLICY CHANGES

While the importance of reforms in the security sector cannot be stressed enough, they cannot in themselves de-escalate direct violence

unless certain other policy changes are implemented. Overall public security has to be ensured by controlling the spread of small arms and by combating the illegal trading of weapons (GTZ 2000: 30–31). The situation in the BTAD is ample illustration of how the proliferation of small arms and illegal weapons can turn an entire area into a zone of unending violence. Towards this end, surrender policies for insurgents also have to be overhauled and their economic and societal rehabilitation ensured. The ad hocism and myopia inherent in these policies need to be removed.

Ad hocism, though, has been the hallmark of many of the Indian State's policies towards addressing conflict situations in Assam. The IDP policies, for instance, need to be changed. For one, India needs to recognise IDPs as a category of people requiring State assistance and further, go on to ratify the UN Guiding Principles on IDPs. National and international humanitarian organisations and human-rights groups should be given better access to IDPs. The exacerbation of conflicts and creation of new armed militant groups can be avoided to a large extent if the IDPs are provided the human security and the political and economic safeguards they need.

There are also many other policies in place which are not ad hoc in nature, but which equally abet militancy and help armed groups flourish by encouraging them to run a parallel system of governance and economy. Sanjib Baruah has pointed out how 'income tax exemption for people designated as STs living in their own states' (2007: 37) has provided 'an incentive for unrestrained and conspicuous accumulation' of wealth and assets: 'The exemption of wealthy tribals from income tax also leaves their wealth wide open to taxation by rebel groups that can hardly be expected to respect the Indian State's protective discrimination rules' (ibid.).

As it stands, even without such tax exemptions and accumulated wealth, various sections of the people in the region have found themselves facing 'tax demands' from rebel groups. Field interviews in Kokrajhar have revealed how government teachers and other officials were forced to regularly contribute a portion of their monthly salary towards the rebel coffers at the peak of the Bodo Movement. Even today, in certain government establishments in Karbi Anglong, budgets for ad hoc projects and payments for contract employees are fixed after factoring in the 'percentage cut' to be set aside for the rebel coffers (field interviews). While such impunity can only be countered through strict vigilance, a major blow can be dealt to the

parallel rebel taxation system by rationalising and uniformalising tax laws everywhere. As Patricia Mukhim (2004), a Khasi intellectual, has questioned: why should 'a millionaire among tribals not be taxed?'

Such rationalisation and uniformity of approach should also be made the hallmarks of certain other policies of the government which deal with the ethnic aspirations of communities. For instance, if the Koch-Rajbangsis can be recognised as STs in Meghalaya, one could very well question why the same cannot be done in Assam. This would diffuse a lot of the tension from the conflict situation the State is in today vis-à-vis the community. The disparate treatment of the Bodos of the north bank of the Brahmaputra and those of southern Assam has also been touched upon earlier, as also its conflict-inducing potential. In such cases, when 'national minorities do not form the majority of the population in areas in which they reside' and territorial autonomy is not feasible, an option that can be explored is the grant of cultural autonomy. Under this arrangement, the community, not the territory it inhabits, is granted autonomy. It allows the community to be governed by its own institutions and legislations in the interest of preserving, protecting and promoting its identity (Benedikter 2007: 43–44). The closest the Indian constitution has come to granting anything like cultural autonomy is in the provision, under the Sixth Schedule, for the formation of autonomous regional councils in an area where 'there are different Scheduled Tribes in an autonomous district'.¹

In an autonomous district with Regional Councils, the District Council shall have only such powers with respect to the areas under the authority of the Regional Council as may be delegated to it by the Regional Council in addition to the powers conferred on it by this Schedule with respect to such areas.²

However, in the course of the relatively recent trend of 'mechanical autonomisation' (Prabhakara 2005) the State has not utilised the chance to introduce a practice and rhetoric free from territorial limitations. The various autonomous council acts continue to emphasise on the territorial limits of the council areas without clearly demarcating the territory, thus creating a conducive atmosphere for further outbreak of ethnic violence. The Mising Autonomous Council Act, 1995, for instance, states:

Whereas it is expedient to provide for the establishment of a Mising Autonomous Council within the State of Assam with maximum

autonomy within the framework of the Constitution, comprising of the satellite areas of Village Councils formed out of blocks of contiguous revenue villages, each having more than 50% population of Mising community, without having any compact area for social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural advancement of the Mising community residing therein [*sic*].³

A fresh look should also be taken at the existing territorial autonomous arrangements. Such 'functional deficits' as have become manifest within these arrangements should not bring the 'whole structure of autonomy' into question (Benedikter 2007: 70). There must be a healthy respect for the main principles behind the formation of such autonomous units, namely power-sharing and joint responsibility. And before the creation of any such new units, 'an implementation plan is to be incorporated in the conflict settlement' (*ibid.*: 426) with the consensus of and proper safeguards for other minorities within these units. In this way, even though autonomous arrangements are usually conceived as solutions to particular ethnic conflicts, they can help a territory, and the people living in it, move beyond narrow ethnic considerations and coexist in cooperation.

However, ethnic and identity concerns cannot altogether be eliminated in this way. In a multi-ethnic region such as Assam, for every community that is granted territorial or cultural autonomy, there will be many others that cannot be accommodated in this way. They may be too widely dispersed or not numerous enough, but that does not negate their need for political representation. Armed insurgencies are rampant only because most ethnic groups in the Northeast are not numerically strong enough to exert any significance influence in a political system that is run by the force of numbers.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to allow more representation of the ethnic groups in the government. The ULFA (Pro-Talk) has suggested that there should be ethnic representation in the state legislative assembly. An upper house can be created through constitutional amendment and each community may be allowed representation, not on the strength of numbers, but on the basis of distinctive identity. The Indian constitution has been amended 94 times till date and has been called a 'living document' (R. Sen 2010). The founding fathers of the constitution envisaged a process of amendment that would be much simpler than that of most other constitutions in the world. But over the years, the Indian State has shown great reluctance in

considering any review of the constitutional provisions with regard to the Northeast. This needs to change and just as the Sixth Schedule of the constitution was amended to accommodate the demands of the Bodo community, the State should consider other constitutional amendments, if the need so arises, in order to holistically address the ethnic conflicts in Assam. Providing for ethnic representation may be a first step. Though it might not be a foolproof solution, it could go a long way towards encouraging ethnic aspirants to at least try out the political system first before resorting to immediate and direct violence.

ECONOMY AND JUST DEVELOPMENT

Despite the many problems inherent in the functioning of autonomous councils, as discussed in the last chapter and the preceding section – it is a fact that the Indian government has been more amenable towards entering into settlements that involve power-sharing arrangements with ethnic groups in conflict rather than sharing resources with them. In reality, competing claims over and ownership of the limited resources are the underlying causes of most ethnic conflicts around the world. And this despite the fact that the overt rhetoric usually revolves around intangibles like identity, culture and self-preservation. However, if the emotional overtone of most ethnic demands is peeled off, the moot issues turn out to be control over land and territory, access to government jobs and other white-collar employment opportunities, and similar economic and opportunity-based issues. The Assam Movement, launched in order to safeguard Axamiyā identity from the onslaught of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, was ultimately an agitation against illegal migrants grabbing the land of the autochthonous farmers and settling down in the Axamiyā homeland and limiting the access of the autochthonous peoples to land and other means of livelihood. The Indian State's inability and/or unwillingness to address this issue soon caused the movement to turn inimical towards legal migrants from mainland India as well: the outsiders, who were seen as representatives of a 'step-motherly' State that was unwilling to intervene on behalf of the Axamiyās in the community's struggle to preserve its identity so long as it could retain its iron grip over the various resources of Assam and the Northeast. Economic blockades were thus set up and the outflow of Assam's

resources to the mainland threatened. One of the most potent slogans of the Assam Movement turned out to be '*Tēj Dim, Tēl Nidiu*' (We will shed our blood, but not give you our oil).

Tea, coal, plywood, oil, and water have been the most important resources of Assam that India has been exploiting for decades now since Assam became a part of the Union. When the Assam Accord was signed, the State promised to allow for Assam's crude oil to be processed in Assam itself through the construction of a second oil refinery at Numaligarh. So far, a miniscule amount of Assam's crude was being processed at the 'toy' refinery in Noonmati which was set up in 1962, while the bulk of it was transported hundreds of miles away through oil pipelines in Barauni in Bihar citing 'security' reasons. The Numaligarh refinery has addressed the issue to some extent while also somewhat increasing the scope for employment for the Axamiyā people. But Assam's own oil still continues to be sold at a premium to the people of the state. The accord could not bridge the justice gap simply by paving the way for the leaders of the Assam Movement to come to power in the state's politics. India's handling of the resources of the state – labelled an example of 'colonial exploitation' by the ULFA, which grew in strength following the Assam Movement – has created this gap and escalated conflicts. Targeting major oil pipelines has been one of the main strategies of guerrilla sabotage undertaken by the ULFA from time to time.

Parag Das, an outspoken intellectual whose views influenced the ULFA's ideology to a great extent and who was later eliminated by the State agencies with the help of their SULFA operatives, had addressed the issue of Assam's economic development at length. In the blueprint he drew up of the economy of a sovereign Assam with the aim to explore whether an independent Assam State as demanded by the ULFA would at all be feasible, he argued that if the people were allowed to take control over their own natural and economic resources, Assam could easily become a self-sufficient economy. He argued that by drawing out Assam's resources in the form of raw materials, the Indian State has been choking any possibility of industrial or infrastructural development in the state while depriving the people of the right to their own resources. An independent Assam should have manufacturing plants that processed all raw materials and sold these in the international market to sustain its economy. Besides, the higher prices the products would fetch through value

addition, employment and livelihood opportunities will also expand (P. K. Das 1995: 74).

Das's vision is equally applicable to an Assam within the ambits of the Indian State. As a federal structure, India should allow the people of the state to take control of their resources in this way and develop their own economy. Now that the question of Assam's sovereignty has been diluted to a large extent, the State should not look at such an approach to the economy of Assam as a threat to its territorial integrity but welcome it as a policy that will only strengthen one of its own resource-rich limbs and, in the process, contribute to the overall health of the body politic.

So far, however, the Indian State's approach to the development of the economy and resources of Assam and the Northeast as a whole has not quite been in this spirit. If anything, most development policies implemented in or planned for the region have been anti-people, thereby exacerbating the conflict situation. To tap the immense water resources of Arunachal Pradesh, for instance, the State has been planning 168 mega dams in this highly seismically sensitive zone. These dams will remain a live threat to the people downstream, mostly in Assam, huge areas of which will be inundated and thousands of people displaced. Meanwhile, it is doubtful what proportion of the thousands of megawatts of power that these dams will generate will be utilised within the Northeast region itself, and how much of it will be siphoned off to the mainland and/or exported to the neighbouring countries. As a result, there has been indignation and widespread protests throughout the Northeast against this proposed development project. In Assam, the Krishak Mukti Sangram Parishad (KMSS), a peasants' body, has been leading a mass movement against big dams and gradually emerging as a potent force in the politics of the state. But the construction of the dams continues and Assam's fate hangs in balance.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring Mizoram, an alternative to big dams has been successfully implemented in at least one instance. In Lohry, in Saiha district of the state, a micro hydel project was inaugurated in January 2011, which was constructed under one of the Indian government's flagship programmes, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which aims to generate income and gainful employment for the rural population of the country. The said project was completed with the local villagers providing the labour, for which they were paid under the scheme, and the power that will

be generated from this project will also go to them (*Vanglaini* 2011). Everywhere in the Northeast, including Assam, there are numerous such water bodies that can be tapped safely for the production of energy while simultaneously generating employment for the local population. The region could thus be empowered and the feeling of alienation among its people successfully erased through more such development policies. These policies also infuse a sense of responsibility and accountability among the local population by giving them a sense of ownership over the projects implemented.

Under the current dispensation, however, the State's policy for the development of the region singularly lacks any scope for infusing the people with any such sense of responsibility or accountability. Marked as 'special category', the states of the Northeast receive 30 per cent of the total allocation of the funds under India's five yearly plans as central assistance for state plans. Of the individual allocation to each state, 90 per cent of the plan assistance is given as a grant and 10 per cent as a loan; most other states of the country receive 30 per cent grant and 70 per cent loan (*Sahni and George* 1999). From time to time, large financial allocations are also made either through specific ministries (such as the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region) and nodal agencies (North East Council), or directly to the states and autonomous bodies. But there is no stipulation on accountability, nor is there any visible 'development' to justify such enormous fund allocation. What has transpired as a result is large-scale corruption among government officials, politicians and bureaucrats. As this public money is 'leaked' into private coffers (*ibid.*), the corrupt ethnic elite also enter into a nexus with the insurgents, who fill their coffers in turn. The result is not only the development of a parallel economy but also the growing influence of criminalised armed groups in the legitimate political process.

Unless the policies of the State instill a sense of responsibility and demand accountability for the financial largesse it doles out to Assam and the Northeast, this trend will continue. It is a no-win situation for not just the people of the region but also for the State itself. Thus, stakeholders need to be created by allowing them a share in the resources. Instead of trying to merely co-opt the elite sections of the society, the State must reach out to the people at the grassroots. And it does not always need to do this through populist schemes and State-sponsored programmes such as the NREGS. In fact, allowing the private sector space and opportunity to develop at the local level

has also been seen to have a salutary effect in peacebuilding (Killick, Srikantha and Gündüz 2005). Local businesses are 'part of the existing conflict context', highly 'networked' and

constituting a powerful section of society (either in terms of political leverage or, at the lower level, the kinds of services provided) with a variety of linkages to different social and political actors and strata, through business relations (with staff, business partners, etc.), but also along other lines, including the political, cultural, ethnic, or religious. (Ibid.)

They are, thus, strategically positioned to intervene in a variety of ways. The State should, therefore, prop them up and use them in its conflict-transformation endeavours.

STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society should be made another stakeholder in the peace process. The absence or inactivity of civil society is a sure sign of 'widespread insecurity' and what is more, its absence also creates an atmosphere conducive for an 'aggravated exploitation of ethnic and cultural differences', which in turn contributes towards a growing 'climate of distrust and suspicion' (Bächler 2004: 4). At the height of the ethnic riots in Bodoland, for instance, despite the widespread violence and mindless bloodletting, a few sane voices emanated from within the Bodo civil society and outside it, which contributed immensely in de-escalating the violence. Where eminent citizens – private individuals – got together at times to maintain order in their immediate vicinity after the riots began, organised civil-society initiatives were also taking place side by side. Certain local NGOs – for example, the Bardaisikhla Club, an organisation of Bodo youths in Kachugaon that enlisted the help of the Adivasi Sewa Samiti, a political party of the Adivasis – took a leading part in these peace initiatives, and other political organisations also joined in (field interviews). Civil-society actors, after all, encompass all elements of active citizenship, ranging from 'the local level (for example, councils of elders), across the mid-level (NGOs, intellectuals), to the top level' (and these include the business world, trade unions, women's associations, churches, peace and human-rights activists, journalists, and scientists) (ibid.). Including all these

constituents in the peacebuilding process would reduce Lederach's (1999) interdependence gap to a large extent.

The civil-society organisations and individuals, however, cannot afford to be biased. For instance, the human-rights organisations in Assam have often been accused of being nothing but front organisations for various insurgent groups: the MASS for the ULFA and the BWJF for the NDFB. They are seen as being overly critical of the armed forces, while turning a blind eye to rights violations by insurgent groups.

Such a perception does indeed erode, to a large extent, the credibility and ability of these organisations to effectively intervene against State and State-sponsored atrocities. It also widens the 'authenticity gap' that Lederach (2005: 49) talks about. In the absence of this gap, civil society can not only contribute towards settling a conflict but can also take ownership of the resultant peace and aid conflict transformation. As it stands, these groups 'have often ended up as "force multipliers" in the cause of peace and settlement' (Bhaumik 2009: 227). MASS advisor Lachit Bordoloi, for instance, was among the few individuals handpicked by the ULFA to intervene with the government on behalf of the organisation in the interest of peace talks as part of the PCG. The State has also often benefitted from the intervention of civil-society organisations in Assam. On the one hand, their intervention has helped the State and its intelligence agencies in opening up channels of communication and dialogue with the militant groups, and on the other hand, their wide social base has also helped them generate mass support and 'social consensus in support of peace', thus proving their usefulness for the 'federal political-bureaucratic establishment' (*ibid.*).

Thus, it is also in the State's interest to allow space for civil-society organisations to intervene in the conflict-resolution process. It can counter the alleged prejudices in their functioning and force these organisations to adopt a more balanced stance by reining in its own armed forces and reducing human-rights abuses and other excesses committed by its own agencies. Educating its civil servants to act as peacemakers and urging them to collaborate with civil-society initiatives to contain violence could also help in this regard. During the Bodo–Adivasi clashes in Kokrajhar district, the one-time deputy commissioner of the district, John Ingti Kathar, whose own roots lie in the conflict-ridden district of Karbi Anglong in southern Assam, involved the civil society and organised various peace committees

in the affected districts. He also took adequate measures to provide the victims a sense of security and is widely remembered in the IDP camps for his contribution. After him, no state agent has been as involved in the process; very few have indeed even visited the camps (field interviews). Bureaucrats like Kathar infuse a sense of confidence in the administrative machinery and ease tensions in conflict zones, while channelising civil-society participation in a positive way. It also, in a way, isolates rebel groups which depend on mass support to create 'alternative social platforms'. When they see that they have 'no choice outside established civil society', they will be forced to give up arms (Bhaumik 2009: 271).

RECONCILIATION AND JUSTICE

While building up a strong civil society can, to some extent, address the interdependence and authenticity gaps that stand in the way of conflict transformation, ensuring that restorative justice is served and reconciliation between conflict parties is effected helps bridge the process-structure gap as well as the justice gap. Dialogues, security-sector reforms, and structural and policy changes only ameliorate direct violence. But in order to transform structural and cultural violence, various other measures need to be undertaken, of which ensuring reconciliation and justice are the most important.

Justice and reconciliation in the context of conflict transformation are highly contested concepts with various questions dogging their application and efficacy (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009: 158). How, for instance, do we determine that a previously divided society has been reconciled; what kind of justice should be meted out and by whom; how much justice is enough; and so on and so forth. Notwithstanding such questions, the growing international recognition that there is an 'ethical dimension to peace' (ibid.: 154) has necessitated that these processes, 'highly visible and charged with symbolism and emotion' as they are (ibid.: 151), should be made a part of the conflict-transformation process.

Justice, mainly of the restorative kind – as opposed to retributive – needs to be achieved so that the underlying causes of conflict are addressed, thus preventing their re-eruption later. This kind of justice, when established, restores faith in the political system, re-establishes the rule of law and standards of human rights, breaks down the culture

of impunity, and deters further criminalisation of society (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009: 154). All these factors have made themselves manifest in the conflict scenario in Assam. In order to overcome them, therefore, some form of restorative justice must be achieved. While the security forces should be held accountable for the human-rights abuses they have perpetuated, the armed militants who have returned to the 'mainstream' but have in the past been responsible for grave crimes against humanity – such as bombing civilian populations and collaborating with State forces to fuel fratricidal wars – should also be brought to book. Often the tendency has been to grant amnesty to these perpetrators in pursuance of the State's policy of co-option. Both State and non-State actors should be similarly brought to justice.

After his arrest and subsequent release from jail, former ULFA Chairperson Arabinda Rajkhowa publicly accepted moral responsibility for a particular instance of bombing innocent children in Dhemaji, Assam – an incident that had created much public outrage against the organisation. He also announced that he and his colleagues were ready to face any verdict passed against them for their involvement in the same. However, he also stipulated that the State's terrorist activities should be judged at the same time (*Asomiya Pratidin* 2011). Such pronouncements, if genuine and followed through, can go a long way towards not just exorcising a possible culture of impunity but also providing the victims with a sense of justice.

Restorative justice thus 'involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions which promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance' (Zehr 1990: 181). It involves holding the wrongdoer directly accountable both for the individual victim as well as the specific community affected by the wrong act. It also requires the wrongdoer to take direct responsibility for making 'things whole again' to the degree that this is possible. Restorative justice aims at providing the victim(s) purposeful access to the courts and correctional processes, which allows them to assist in shaping the wrongdoers' obligations. Through all of this, it encourages the community to become directly involved in supporting victims, holding wrongdoers accountable and providing opportunities for wrongdoers to reintegrate into the community (Carey 1996: 152). When justice is served in this way, 'fairly recent and still potent events' are moved back into history, 'thereby establishing a line between past and present' (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009: 154). The path towards reconciliation thus becomes clear.

The main elements of reconciliation may be outlined as: an honest acknowledgement of the harm and injury inflicted by both parties on each other; expressing sincere remorse and readiness to apologise; willingness of both parties to let go of anger and bitterness; a commitment by the perpetrator not to repeat the injury; sincere efforts to redress past grievances and compensate; and entering into a new, mutually enriching relationship (Assefa 2001: 340). Forgiveness forms an important part of reconciliation; but in order to forgive and let go of the pain of the past, it is essential to know the truth: 'The restorative meaning of forgiveness – a concept of reconciliation based upon repairing relations – is undermined when it is faced with recalcitrance, lack of information, and disputes about wrongdoing' (Newman 2002: 36).

Constituting truth commissions, therefore, becomes an important part of effecting reconciliation. There have been many such truth commissions in several post-conflict societies, but the South African Truth and Reconciliation process was the most ambitious in its scope and goals 'in which amnesty from state punishment was granted for full disclosure of truth about wrongs committed' (Santa-Barbara 2007: 182). Although there are many practical obstacles to their implementation and their achievements leave a lot to be desired, truth commissions serve a few very important functions. For one, they can deal with the particular kind of human-rights abuses involving disappearances and killings by anonymous squads. The shadowy nature of these crimes, the deniability of the perpetrators and the climate of fear and suspicion they create can be uncovered through truth commissions (Popkin and Roht-Arriaza 1995: 81–82).

Uncovering the truth about these events allows family and friends the possibility of closure and helps to break down the social climate of fear and impunity created by the secrecy and deniability. Related to this, investigatory commissions can shortcut some of the difficulties involved in employing normal channels like the police and the courts, which can pose a serious obstacle when both have been complicit in the human rights violations and neither is capable of independent inquiries. (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009:159)

Families of the victims of the 'secret killings' that took place in Assam could find closure through such a truth commission, as could those of the ULFA members who have been 'missing' since the 2003 Operation All-Clear in Bhutan. Since that year, no information has

been provided by the Indian government regarding the whereabouts of five top leaders of the ULFA: Ashanta Baghphukan, Ponaram Dihingia alias Prakash Gogoi, Naba Changmai alias Muhi Dihingia, Bening Rabha, and Nilu Chakrabarty. Although the popular perception is that these leaders were killed in contravention of the rules of war, the families of the untraceable leaders continue to hold out hope for their return or at least for some definitive information that will provide them with a purpose to move on. With no response forthcoming from the government, however, the mystery behind the leaders' disappearance remains a continued source of mistrust between the rebel group and the State authorities. Indeed, State agencies have been involved in perpetration, fabrication and concealment, making the employment of 'normal channels' to uncover the truth impossible in both this case as well as in the case of the 'secret killings', where the government-constituted enquiry commissions have failed to assign responsibility on anybody so far.

Truth commissions also have another very important function to play from the point of view of ethnic reconciliation. They deconstruct the discourse that lies at the heart of ethnic conflicts and lay the foundation of a new discourse of non-violent resolution

by exploring the social and political conditions that allowed human rights abuses to occur, rehumanizing victims and perpetrators by symbolic encounters, assigning individual rather than group responsibility for acts of abuse, and introducing a new political language (based on truth, reconciliation, forgiveness, and mercy) into the political and wider social arena. (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009: 158)

Reconciling ethnic differences in this way could be the first step towards transforming the conflicts raging in Assam for decades now. However, for the purpose, there must be a political will and public pressure. Given the prevailing social atmosphere and the political climate of the state, it is doubtful how much of either of the two factors would come into play to make truth commissions a reality in Assam.

In any case, other smaller steps towards reconciliation and changing people's mindsets can be initiated so that the brutalisation and the culture of violence and impunity that has ingrained itself in society can gradually be shed. For instance, peace and reconciliation education in schools should be started. The multicultural fabric of society should

be upheld – already certain positive developments have taken place in this direction. The State and its various agencies, such as the state tourism department, have been taking small steps towards showcasing and promoting the ethnic diversity of the population by organising cultural festivals like the Brahmaputra Beach and the Dehing-Patkai festivals every year. These festivals incorporate traditional and modern attractions to bring in tourists from outside Assam, and by exposing the rich culture of the state, encourage a better understanding of its ethos. Various youth groups and civil-society organisations from among the ethnic communities have also come together to organise cultural festivals showcasing their unique ethnic heritage. The Karbi Cultural Society has been organising the Karbi Youth Fest as a means of reclaiming their indigenous pride. Similar festivals should be held by all the different ethnic groups of Assam, and participation from all communities encouraged. It is only through interaction and better understanding among communities that peace can be ushered in. Peace, after all, is not just ‘the absence of violence in all of its forms’ but also ‘the presence of mutually beneficial cooperation and mutual learning’ (Fischer 2007: 188).

In fine, the basic premise behind reconciliation and justice is that ‘the past must be dealt with if a more peaceful future is to be constructed’ (Bercovitch and Jackson 2009: 152). But one need not always look back at the past through the lens of conflict – there are various lessons to be learnt from the past, and among other things, conflict transformation can also be effected through revisiting certain traditions and traditional practices.



NOTES

1. See the full text of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian constitution with amendments, <http://lawmin.nic.in/coi/SIXTH-SCHEDULE.pdf> (accessed 30 June 2011).
2. Ibid.
3. See the full text of the Mising Autonomous Council Act, 1995, http://www.neportal.org/northeastfiles/Assam/ActsOrdinances/Mising_Autonomous_Council_Act_1995.asp (accessed 30 June 2011).

Nine

Back to the Future

Tradition and Transformation



The restorative-justice movements in many places of the world, such as New Zealand, Canada and the United States, have been highly influenced by the outlook on justice and the teachings prevalent among the aboriginal societies that reside in these countries. Although no common sets of principles exist under the rubric of ‘aboriginal justice’ or ‘aboriginal teachings’, it is the basic underpinnings of the various cultures, beliefs and practices that have given shape to certain programmes established for the administration of justice among these societies (Leung 1999). Such an approach of revisiting, learning and re-implementing aboriginal practices and principles, can be applied to Assam too, as the basis for conflict transformation, ethnic reconciliation and peacebuilding has always been present in its history and in the interethnic Axamiyā ethos. Conflict-management techniques, as Lederach points out, cannot – and should not – be transferred across cultures because in the traditional culture of every region or community, the potential for peacebuilding already exists (1995, cited in Reimann 2004). To explore this potential in the context of Assam, we need to co-relate the inspirations from the past with the prescriptions for the future. I do so here while weighing them against contemporary thinking in the field of conflict transformation.

DE-TERRITORIALISATION

In his *A Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* published in 1872, Edward Dalton noted that most of the indigenous population of the Eastern Duars, the majority of whom belonged to the Bodo community, had only just taken to the plough instead of the hoe (Dalton cited in Guha 2000: 34), the hoe being the main instrument of swidden or shifting cultivation, the plough of settled. In other words, till the turn of the

19th century, sections of the Bodo people were migratory in nature. The availability of cultivable land in abundance was, no doubt, one of the major reasons for such migratory habits, but the fact remains that fixed boundaries of habitation did not exist till that point in history. However, when migrants from East Bengal and mainland India began to pour in and reclaim land for agriculture under encouragement from the colonial government, the autochthons found the available expanse of cultivable land shrinking. That was when the Bodos of northern Assam, like certain other autochthonous groups of the province, settled down and took to sedentary cultivation.

Besides agriculture, trade and other day-to-day activities had also been a major cause of population movement till the end of the 19th century. Such movements did not occur just within the Duars but also between the hills and the plains through the Duars. Free movement of populations between the pre-colonial Ahom and Bhutan territories, for instance, was more the norm than the exception. The rulers of both territories shared periodical administrative rights over the Duar regions. On the face of it, in an era of monarchy, when military conquests of rival monarchs' territories added to the empire's glory, such an arrangement that did not apparently give primacy to territorial control might seem anomalous. But it is only in a top-down view of history that such a perception would emerge. In order to understand history holistically, one also needs to go into the history of the innumerable small kingdoms and territories, ruled mostly by ethnic rajas and petty kings, which propped up the might of the larger Ahom or Koch kingdoms; the Tiwa kings of Gobha and Dimoria on the south bank of the Brahmaputra and the Koch rajas of the Duars in the north are a few examples of such kingdoms. Many of these rajas held hereditary rights and paid taxes or tributes to the surrounding powerful regimes but maintained a large degree of autonomy over the administration of their own territories (cf. Bhuyan 1974; Hamilton 1987). Affiliation to the more powerful regimes provided these smaller kingdoms security from aggression and freedom from interference by neighbouring kings. In their turn, the rulers of these powerful regimes could enlist the help of these smaller kingdoms in times of their own need, for instance, in times of war when more manpower was needed to safeguard the boundaries of one's empire. In pursuance of the same policy, if all the constituent ethnic groups and communities of Assam opted for internal autonomy and allowed the superstructure

of the state government to handle the issues of common interest, a truly federal nature of governance can be devised.

One would, however, need to look beyond territorial claims if every community of Assam was to be granted autonomy in the interest of peaceful coexistence. The reason is that there just is not enough territory to go around given the rich ethnic diversity of the land. This is why the territorial demands of the Bodos and the Koches have overlapped, and also why the Bodos had taken to systemically cleansing their proposed homeland of settler communities. In an age when cyber communities and virtual reality have created alternative ideas of space and belonging, the ethnic communities of Assam could also perhaps look for an alternative to territorialising their demands. It is true, of course, that during ethnic conflicts like the ones raging in Assam, 'concrete and tangible stakes' often become infused with 'symbolic and even transcendent qualities'. Territory is just one of these stakes. And because tangible stakes are bestowed with intangible qualities, they become 'difficult to divide', thus encouraging disagreements and 'more hostility' (Vasquez and Valeriano 2009: 194–95). The option of cultural autonomy has been touched upon in Chapter 8. The means and methods to augment the powers of self-rule within the ambit of such an autonomous arrangement without territorial limitations should be further explored.

The various communities ought perhaps to revisit their not-so-distant histories when territorial boundaries were not sacrosanct enough to keep them from searching for better lives, agricultural lands and other means of livelihood wherever the opportunity arose. Their migratory habits did not undermine their sense of belonging to a particular community and culture. The ethnic revival movements of recent years – which have brought back to life many identities that were half assimilated or nearly entirely subsumed by the forces of history – go a long way towards proving this. Even from the perspective of the current international scenario, in the contemporary era of globalisation and increasing movements of peoples across boundaries, it is surprising that such intolerant rhetoric of territorial exclusivity should find currency and acceptance. Perhaps it is time now to de-territorialise ethnicity and think more in terms of 'space' rather than 'territory'. The emotional foundation of territorial claims needs to be shaken up and the issue given a more tangible value. Simultaneously, there should be more open-mindedness towards 'permitting a multi-layered use of the same space to practice different cultures'.

This would also foster mutual tolerance among communities (Vasquez and Valeriano 2009: 204). 'There may still be other issues, such as social integration, prohibitions on intermarriage, and so forth, but the issue is stripped of its territorial content' (ibid.).

BEYOND ETHNICITY

Amidst the current atmosphere of intolerance, it is debatable how far such an approach will be adopted by the communities in conflict, even if it is in the interest of peaceful coexistence. After all, the ethnic elite, who have the most to gain from prolonged conflicts, would not prioritise the interests of the actual sufferers in a conflict situation: the people at the grassroots. It is these people, irrespective of ethnicity and community, who bear the brunt of the violence that takes place during ethnic riots. It is they who are killed, maimed or displaced, and they who have to live makeshift lives for decades on end. The process of healing and conflict transformation also, therefore, has to start from among them. It is they who have to initiate ethnic reconciliation.

The communities of Assam have always had a strong tradition of grassroots-level participation in various matters of communal interest. Even during the Ahom rule, although most administrative officers at various levels and in different parts of the kingdom enjoyed hereditary rights to their posts or were appointed by the king or his representatives, there were a few elective officials at the lowest level of the social organisation.

The only elective officers appear to have been the Gaon Buras or village heads, among the Kacharis, Rabhas, and lower classes of Hindus and Muhammadans; and the Bangthais among the Lalungs and Mikirs . . . When any domestic or social question has to be settled, the Gaon Buras or Bangthais convene a village meeting, or *mel* as it is termed. The *melkis* meet at a given time and place, the arguments on both sides of the question are discussed, and the members disperse after giving their opinions on the subject. (Hunter 1982 [1879]: 43–44)

Among the Bodos, the *mel* took the form of the village *samāj* or council. It was a powerful instrument of social control and rule. Keeper of customary laws, the *samāj* was also the only legal recourse for most Bodo villagers even in 'post'-colonial Assam – the state judicial apparatus was either too far away, too expensive or too time-consuming

and complicated. After the ABSU established its leadership in Bodo society, its *ānchalik*, or regional branches, took over the role of the *samāj*. Many cases of dispensation of justice by the ABSU *ānchaliks* have been recounted in the course of field interviews. The doing away entirely of any provision under the BTC for such a substructure that is in immediate contact with the people has, therefore, come in for much criticism (field interviews).

As evident from Hunter's observation cited above (1982 [1879]: 43–44), the tradition of village councils was not prevalent among the 'tribal' communities alone; such *melks* were common among the 'non-tribal' Hindu Axamiyās as well. However, it was not just the *melkis* (those participating in a *mel*) of the lower classes of people that met in this way. The institution of the *nāmghar* has served as a community prayer hall, meeting place and peoples' court for all sections of the Axamiyā Hindu society over the centuries, and continues to do so in certain parts of the state. For the Muslims, the mosque served a similar purpose. These were the various forums where people got together to deliberate on matters affecting the community. They need to be revived so that the sense of community can stay alive. Today, they can serve as platforms for initiating ethnic reconciliation.

The basis of such ethnic reconciliation has to be laid through a strengthening of the 'symmetrical pathways' of the relationships between neighbouring communities. In her study of the conflictive and cooperative relations between communities in the Philippines, Melanie Hughes McDermott (2000) has used the concepts of 'boundaries' and 'pathways'. According to such a classification of relations, 'boundaries' establish the differences between peoples, whereas 'pathways' illuminate boundary-crossing social relationships. There are boundaries of identity (of delimitation between groups), territory (of homeland or nativity), trust (expectations of habitual and amiable interaction with other groups), and interaction (exclusive spheres of the social universe).

'Pathways' are of two kinds – 'symmetrical' and 'asymmetrical'. 'Asymmetrical pathways' include relationships of domination and exploitation where one group is dependent on the other and cannot afford to get into a conflictive relationship with it – at least till certain other necessary or enabling conditions of conflict also arise. 'Symmetrical pathways', on the other hand, include reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships and include bonds of friendship, intermarriage, social and political solidarity, and so on. Clearly,

therefore, it is upon these boundary-crossing ‘symmetrical pathways’ that measures to transform conflicts and initiate ethnic reconciliation can and should be based. Identifying and putting these pathways to pragmatic use is something only the people themselves can do. The boundaries and asymmetrical pathways have been gaining in strength and becoming more pronounced among the communities of Assam. They need to be identified through better communication among the people and overcome through dialogue at the grassroots level. The Gāon Burās, the Bāngthāis and other such people invested with authority by the community itself can take the lead in initiating such dialogues.

These dialogues need not always have an overtly political agenda or focus. Even seemingly innocuous means of sharing experiences and information, such as storytelling, can be used for the purpose. As a means of ‘desilencing’ experience, storytelling often ‘empowers’ people to address previously “latent” problems and conflicts. Such mobilization, once begun, leads to a groups’ understanding their problems in increasingly complex ways because, once people begin to articulate their story, they also begin to develop it and base action on it’ (Senehi 2009: 204). A lazy evening at the neighbourhood *nāmghar* can provide the setting for such storytelling sessions, which can lay the foundation for the coming together of the members of different ethnic communities in reconciliation.

At the same time, such venues and meetings can also bring the people together to address immediate and overt political concerns. Assam’s history is full of accounts of various *rāiz mels*, or peoples’ meets, which have overcome various boundaries between communities and brought the people together in solidarity against a common enemy – the oppressive elite. During British rule, for instance, these *mels* had proved to be potent instruments for opposing harsh taxation laws. Phulagurir dhewā and Patharughātar nan are the two most celebrated peoples’ uprisings instigated by *rāiz mels* in Assam during the colonial rule. The Phulaguri uprising of 1861 was mainly led by the Tiwa and Kachari peasants with the backing of certain other sections of Axamiyā society in Nagaon district on the south bank of the Brahmaputra (Barpujari 1999: 94). On the north bank, in places that now fall under the case study area, such *mels* were quite common and a constant source of headache for the colonial administration. In Pati Darrang, Nalbari, Rangiya, Tamulpur, Hajo, Barama, Bajali and a

few other areas, *mels* were banned, but sporadic skirmishes between the British rulers and the Axamiyā masses could not be curbed (ibid.: 97–98). Hindu–Muslims, Koch–Kacharis, all made common cause against the injustices of the British administration towards the Axamiyā peasant at Patharughat of Darrang district in 1894, when hundreds of peasants marched together and were mercilessly suppressed (ibid.: 99). The incidents in Patharughat, Phulaguri and elsewhere have remained strong reminders about the power of the people. When they came together, as they did through the platform of the *rāiz mels*, they even shook the confidence of the mighty British colonisers. Such a powerful platform should definitely be revived to facilitate dialogue and the commencement of the process of ethnic reconciliation in today's conflict-ridden Assam.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

That the people's power can still be successfully mobilised has been proved in recent decades by various grassroots-level organisations in Upper Assam. A few organisations, small in scope and intent, have been addressing locality-specific issues. The Save Rohmaria committee, for instance, organised itself in the Rohmaria area of Dibrugarh district where, thanks to land erosion, '300,000 villagers, one-time well-off peasants, have been displaced and now live in abject poverty'. The committee successfully forced the Oil India Limited (OIL), a public-sector undertaking, to take measures against erosion in exchange for allowing it access to the rich oil deposits in the area (BBC News 2009). Some other organisations, such as the Brihattar Tengani Unnayan Sangram Samiti (BTUSS) and the KMSS, have mobilised the peasantry to fight for land rights. Most of them originated in the Upper Assam district of Golaghat that borders Nagaland state, although the KMSS has considerably widened its scope subsequently. It has also gone beyond fighting for land rights and exposed corruption in government departments, demanded solutions to border disputes with neighbouring states, opposed the building of big dams and sought intervention in preventing land erosion, besides addressing ecological and environmental concerns (A. Saikia 2008). In recent years, the KMSS has emerged as a potent factor in Assam's politics.

Interestingly, none of these organisations has mobilised the people along ethnic lines and the issues they have been addressing are also not directly related to ethnic concerns. Ethnic conflicts in the areas

of their operation are also rare. Akhil Gogoi, an Ahom, is the general secretary of the KMSS, while Pabitrabrata Daimary, a Bodo, is its working president. In a personal interview, Gogoi admitted that perhaps the only reason there has hardly been any instance of ethnic violence in the KMSS's principal areas of operation is because the issues of governance, development, and land and livelihood addressed by the organisation have relevance for every ethnic group of Assam. Keeping these issues separate from the emotions generated by ethnic and/or identity concerns has also kept conflicts between communities at bay.

In sharp contrast, the situation in Bodoland has proved how embroiling the same issues with ethnic and identity concerns may not necessarily lead to the uplift of the community. Immediately after the creation of the BTAD, there was a proliferation of self-help schemes and finances for entrepreneurial ventures in the area. Within one year of the formation of the BTC, the council had released ₹1,480,000 (USD 32,300 approximately) under sericulture-development schemes alone, and 41 beneficiaries had been allotted the amount (BTC 2004). Not surprisingly, most of the beneficiaries are Bodo. Today, a number of Bodo households, even in the residential areas of Kokrajhar town, run weaving or spinning centres. All contracts of the government departments go to the Bodos, or at least through Bodo middlemen to people of other ethnic communities.

On the face of it, therefore, Bodo people are prospering thanks to the success of their ethnic-identity movement. A closer look, however, at this scenario brings out the grim truth. Given the lack of business acumen among them, quite a few of the Bodo-owned businesses are actually sub-let and contracts handed over unofficially to non-Bodo contractors and businessmen. In the absence of Bodos equipped enough for most jobs, the non-Bodo skilled workers also remain. Worse, they continue in their respective spheres with the blessings of a section of the newly empowered Bodo elite. Autonomy, therefore, seems to have served only a certain section of the Bodos, and it is doubtful whether it can ever rise to the challenge of empowering Bodo society as a whole. I was myself witness to Bodo individuals being chased out of the deputy commissioner's office in Kokrajhar by an additional deputy commissioner (himself a Bodo), whom they had approached for information on loans for setting up small businesses (field observations).

In contrast, movements like the one led by KMSS seek to empower the people at the grassroots by taking on the elite. Perhaps the same model should be followed by people elsewhere in Assam, especially in the case study area, if they are to emerge out of violence and move towards economic as well as political empowerment. The KMSS draws its ideological inspiration from the Axamiyā icon Bishnu Prasad Rabha, who was a Bodo by birth. His participation in the agrarian mobilisation led by the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI) in the period 1945–52 had instilled the movement with much fervor and earned it a huge mass base. In his speeches, he claimed to be the ‘heart’s kin’ of every Axamiyā. For him, the ownership of this identity lay not with the elitist middle class but with the worker and the peasant, and not with one particular ethnic community, but with all the communities that have contributed in creating Axamiyā culture and identity (Rabha 2008). The KMSS claims to be ‘reviving the struggle in the way shown by Bishnu Prasad Rabha for the greater interest of the deprived sections of the State’ (*The Assam Tribune* 2010).

REWRITING HISTORY

More than an individual who had an immense influence on all aspects of Axamiyā life, including politics, the arts and literature as well as society at large, Bishnu Prasad Rabha was a phenomenon, and he remains a legend of modern Assam. In his person and his works is epitomised the ideal Axamiyā ethos that needs to be reclaimed to realise any hope of ethnic reconciliation in Assam. For one, Rabha’s vision of Axamiyā history and ethnic unity should be revived – it may be mythopoeic in parts and scientific in others, but it is always entirely grounded on a sincere belief in the essential interethnic nature of the Axamiyā identity. In his ‘Axamiyā Kristi’ (Rabha 2008), where he draws a brief history of the Axamiyā people, their society, culture and literature, Rabha puts forward the possibility that the first-ever poem composed in the Axamiyā language could very well have been a folk verse in the Rajbangsi language: ‘*Tār nāk dāngṛā betātā mor sok dāngri betitār mon phusulāi gelo hātare khāru dī*’ (His big-nosed son seduced my big-eyed daughter with bangles for her hands) (ibid.: 940). His mythopoeic imagination leads him to invest the Bodo god Shibrai with the title of the primeval Axamiyā – Shibrai is also the Shiva of Hindu imagination (ibid.: 932). The two gods fuse in his imagination, just as the Bodos and the Hindu Axamiyās converge into

one identity and one people in the course of the history of Assam. Rabha's approach to the history of Assam – from among the lives and lived traditions of the people who shaped it – is at complete odds with that of most other Axamiyā scholars who were engaged in writing the national history during the colonial period. This latter group of pundits was reconstructing the ancient history based on 'an array of "classical" Sanskrit texts' (B. Kar 2004: 8). In their eagerness to seek acceptance in the pan-Indian narrative, despite being 'a late-coming frontier province in [the] imperial space of British India' (ibid.: 10), these scholars assigned 'the leftover and the "rarely-mentioned"' in these texts to their part of the country 'since the rest of the Indian space had already been flagged' (ibid.: 13). Rabha's version of Assam's history, however, while being acutely aware of the Aryan heritage and its immense influence upon the formation of Axamiyā culture, harmoniously interwove the non-Aryan strands into the narrative. The result was a balanced vision of history as it evolved through the ages. Undertaking projects to rewrite the history of Assam through the lens of Rabha's understanding could go a long way towards effecting ethnic reconciliation in present-day Assam where conflicting claims to ancient historical glory abound: 'Was the ancient king of Kamrup, Narakasur, for instance, a Bodo king or Aryan Hindu?' 'Could Naranarayan be considered a Koch king or Axamiyā Hindu?'

Apart from his writings, in his person also Rabha epitomised the interethnic Axamiyā. Once, during his adolescent years, Rabha was denied entry into the Barpeta *xattrā* by its Xankari priests (this was only one of the many ways in which Bodo people were discriminated against in the larger Hindu society). Rabha refused to bow down and entered the *xattrā* anyway, claiming that it was one of the ancestors of his community, the Koch king Naranarayan, who had built the *xattrā* in the first place. In this claim, Rabha's understanding of the intricate relationship between the Bodo and the Koch communities becomes clear. At the same time, this kinship is offset by the historical wrongs that the Hindu Axamiyās have heaped upon these communities. As Rabha boldly pronounced, social and religious ostracism of the Bodos or the Koches as lower classes of Hindus is ludicrous given the fact that Xankardeb, the guru of Axamiyā Vaishnavism, was given shelter in his Kamata kingdom by the Koch king Naranarayan at a time when he was being persecuted in Assam proper. Naranarayan was also a great patron of Xankari art, literature and culture. Rabha's logical approach to such discriminatory practices is what has been

lacking in most of the smaller ethnic groups' approaches towards the dominance of the Axamiyā Hindu middle class in Assam. Like the ABSU literature published during the Bodo Movement and quoted in earlier chapters shows, they would rather shed the Axamiyā identity and allow one particular section of the population – the 'non-tribal' Hindus – to hijack its ownership. The need, however, is for them to reclaim their joint ownership over the interethnic Axamiyā identity, like Rabha did. Today, Rabha is hailed as an Axamiyā icon, despite the fact that he was a Bodo individual. But his contributions towards every aspect of Axamiyā life and culture have been such that nobody can deny him that status. Neither can he be exclusively appropriated by either the Bodo community or the Axamiyā middle class. Shared legends and icons can thus go a long way towards infusing a sense of common kinship among communities in conflict.

Another personality in the history of Assam who is similarly revered as a common icon for all Axamiyās is Chilarai, the Koch king Naranarayan's brother and celebrated general of his powerful army. Chilarai's military prowess has been celebrated for centuries, and he has been seen as being on an equal footing with another legendary Axamiyā warrior, Lachit Barphukan, an Ahom general. For the dominant Axamiyā and the Koch communities to jointly share the ownership of an icon as venerated as Chilarai is to live with their mutual differences while coexisting in harmony with the 'other'. Identity, after all, is a process that is ultimately 'formed across differences' (Papastergiadis 2000: 157) and exists in the space between the 'self' and the 'other'. Since neither the 'self' nor the 'other' is a constant commodity, identity also is a perpetual engagement with multiplicity and difference.

This fact has been underlined by Jyotiprasad Agarwala, another legendary Axamiyā intellectual, in his approach to Axamiyā identity. A naturalised Axamiyā, in his poem 'Axamiyā Dekār Ukti' composed in 1943, Agarwala (1996), in the first person, claims for himself multiple identities, all of which constitute the corporate identity of Axamiyā. He is the Hindu, he is the Muslim, he is the Singpho, he is the Manipuri.¹ He is also the Na-Axamiyā, or neo-Axamiyā, which is the epithet he coined for the Muslims of East Bengali origin in this poem, an epithet applied to the community to this day. Thus, he was perhaps the first person to go beyond a demand from other communities for assimilating into the Axamiyā fold and offering himself up to a dialogue with difference.

Agarwala's coinage of the term Na-Axamiyā needs closer scrutiny in the context of the identity conflicts raging in Assam today. While most of the ethnic communities of Assam were gradually withdrawing from the Axamiyā fold, the Muslims of East Bengali origin were, on the contrary, embracing the identity more and more. One of the means through which they did this was to declare Axamiyā as their mother tongue in successive censuses in 'post'-colonial Assam. In recent decades, ultra right-wing intolerance against this immigrant community has been on the rise. Besides, given that illegal migrants continue to pour in from Bangladesh – the erstwhile East Bengal of their origin – the entire community is often branded as 'foreigners' and persecuted despite the fact that many of them have been in Assam for centuries. While it is true that amidst such hostility a small section of the community is increasingly getting radicalised, an overwhelming majority, though, is engaged in a process of quietly and confidently congealing its identity as a legitimate component of the Axamiyā nation. Thus, after thousands of East Bengali migrants were massacred in Nellie when chauvinism peaked during the Assam Movement, the villagers refused to leave their hearth and home. What is more, the tombstones of those killed during the pogrom were inscribed in the Axamiyā language, even though they continue to speak in Bengali among themselves. Nearly three decades later, there has been little change in this disposition. In 2011, Master Salim, the secretary general of the Char Saporī Sahitya Parishad (CSSP), a literary body of the community, declared:

Our ancestors may be of East Bengal origin, but several generations down the line have well accepted Assamese. Our effort is to make it a vibrant language among different sections of people in Assam. We believe that such an attempt will go on to enrich and strengthen Assamese language. (*The Times of India* 2011)

Politically too, this settler community has come a long way in asserting its rights within Assam through the medium of its own political party and distinct political voice. It has, therefore, embraced its hyphenated identity as Na-Axamiyā and is demanding the right to exist as a separate entity while continuing to be a part of the generic Axamiyā identity. If a settler community with only a few centuries of history in Assam can boldly assert its share of the identity it has helped shape in so many ways, it is unfortunate that the autochthonous communities

that have a far greater contribution – and hence, far larger stakes – should opt out. Perhaps it is time now for these communities to think in terms of similarly hyphenated identities, such as Bodo–Axamiyā, Koch–Axamiyā, Hindu–Axamiyā, and so on, in order to reclaim their distinctiveness, a distinctiveness that so uniquely shaped the commonality they all share: the Axamiyā identity.



NOTE

1. There is a sizeable Manipuri population living in Assam, but Jyotiprasad Agarwala's formulation may also have been coloured by the traditional vision of 'Bar Aham' which incorporates all peoples of the seven states of the Northeast within the idea of Assam.

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